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Complexity, Intersection and the Politics of Aberration

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Content

I. Introduction	1
II. Intersectionality against intersection	3
III. Beyond asymmetrical constructions of complexity	5
IV. Which intersectionality in a context of punitive hyper-visibility?	6
V. Symbolic overdetermination vs. semantic underdetermination	9
VI. Conclusion	10

I. Introduction

In her keynote lecture, Patricia Purtschert¹ deploys a radical approach to the relationship between gender and colonial othering. Her reflection is an attempt to overcome problematic accounts of gender that first register white-bourgeois gender norms as universal only to denounce the historical construction of colonized bodies as aberrations of the modern gender and sexual order. Indeed, those approaches fail to see that these othering processes are part and parcel of the production of gendered whiteness, as postcolonial,

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¹ PATRICIA PURTSCHERT, *Shifting Frames: Re-thinking Gender from a Postcolonial Perspective*, unpublished keynote lecture, 14 February 2019, conference “Law on the Move”, Fribourg, Switzerland.

decolonial, and queer of color thinkers have convincingly argued over the past decades.² Purtschert suggests going further and finds that some critical accounts are still overly centering the white bourgeois gender order. She calls for imagining more encompassing accounts of global gender that would lay the emphasis, among other things, on processes of resistance by which those at the margins of the order re-appropriate othering in ways that position them as avant-gardes of gender subversion.

Here I would like to briefly suggest how the historical critique deployed by Purtschert echoes some of the contemporary debates in the social sciences and humanities surrounding intersectionality's relationship to whiteness and difference. Could there be ways in which some uses of intersectionality reiterate the white gender order, while other deployments of it would avoid such reiteration? I will argue that this is the case. To oversimplify, I will call the first approach the "liberal" approach to intersectionality, and the other approach the "radical" approach.

This short essay does not attempt to provide new answers to the question of whether the academic mainstreaming of intersectionality amounts to a "whitening" of the concept³, nor does it address contemporary confluences of intersectional critique with normative politics of organizational and corporate diversity⁴ or the intersectional literature's alleged reduction of colonialism and capitalism to national-level issues of race and class relations.⁵ It remains agnostic as to who "owns" intersectionality⁶ and does not seek to delimit a finite list of power systems and axes of identity that should be taken into consideration in intersectional analysis.⁷ For its limited scope, this chapter does not locate whiteness in who appropriates intersectionality in which institutional setting, even

² ANNE STOLER, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*, Durham 1995; RODERICK FERGUSON, *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis 2003; FRANÇOISE VERGÈS, *Le ventre des femmes: capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme*, Paris 2017.

³ SIRMA BILGE, *Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies*, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 2013, 405-424.

⁴ JASBIR PUAR, 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': *Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory*, *Philosophia*, 2(1), 2012, 49-66; JENNIFER NASH, *Black feminism reimaged: After intersectionality*, Durham 2018.

⁵ PAOLA BACCHETTA, *Décoloniser le féminisme: intersectionnalité, assemblages, co-formations, co-productions*, *Les cahiers du CREDEF*, 20, 2015, 1-9.

⁶ KATHY DAVIS, *Who owns intersectionality? Some reflections on feminist debates on how theories travel*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(2), 113-127.

⁷ JENNIFER NASH, *Re-thinking intersectionality*, *Feminist review*, 89, 2008, 1-15; PATRICIA PURTSCHERT/KATRIN MEYER, *Die Macht der Kategorien. Kritische Überlegungen zur Intersektionalität*, *Feministische Studien*, 28(1), 2010, 130-142; BARBARA TOMLINSON, *To tell the truth and not get trapped: Desire, distance, and intersectionality at the scene of argument*, *Signs*, 38(4), 2013, 993-1017.

though this has been a fruitful direction of reflexive critique; instead, it identifies conceptual schemas, metaphors and theoretical habits that cut through settings and audiences but nevertheless converge in deploying the geometric language of the intersection in ways that may reconstitute white-centric constructions of otherness.

II. Intersectionality against intersection

Inheriting from over a century of thinking by US women of color about the strategic dilemmas associated with having to navigate emancipation movements and structured forms of minority subjectivation that only partially reflected their joint experience of racial and gender oppression, the notion of intersectionality was famously coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, in particular to account for the reluctance of US courts to recognize juridically career discrimination faced by Black women.⁸

Thus, theories of intersectionality were not developed to merely point at intersections but to capture subject positions made invisible by dominant systems of normative minority representation, protection, and claims-making. Whether in social movements or in antidiscrimination law, it involved breaking with the tacit assumption that being “just a woman” meant being a white woman and that being just black meant being a man. Crenshaw’s legal critique did not aim at stating that women of color were at the intersection of gender and race but at deconstructing the political and legal processes by which they were *made to appear* as if they were at the intersection of gender and race, whereas white women and men of color were *made to appear* as if they were not.

White women were – legally, politically and theoretically – “representative” of women, and Black men “representative” of the Black political and juridical subject; by contrast, Black women were artificially constructed as a complicated case deemed representative of neither (in law) or less representative of each (in emancipation movements and political theory). The problem was not so much the intersection of blackness and femaleness, but really whiteness and androcentric domination in law and politics, which made black womanhood *seem* to be particularly an intersection, whereas the intersection, say, between womanhood and whiteness, that is, between women and privilege, was denied as an intersection, and privilege itself thereby kept invisible.

⁸ KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, 139-168.

The radical lesson of intersectionality is that there are no generic cases of an oppression, only specific ones. When bell hooks writes about homeplace as a site of resistance for women of color,⁹ she does not assert the specific complexity of Black women as opposed to the universal simplicity of white women. She provincializes white feminists' description of home as a mere site of oppression by locating this standpoint in white privilege (she also faults Black movements of the preceding decades for neglecting the centrality of home and female domestic labor in the fight for racial justice and self-determination). When Françoise Vergès¹⁰ describes the forced abortions and sterilizations of non-white women in the overseas postcolonial department of La Réunion in the 1970s at the very time when abortion was still prohibited in metropolitan France and the fight to legalize it took center stage among the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF), she does not claim that MLF claims were *too* universal and thereby did not account for the specificity of Réunion women. Instead, she deploys intersectional and decolonial critique to decenter white French metropolitan feminism and undo its monopoly on feminist demands, while connecting MLF's failure to incorporate Réunion women's right to bear children in the fight for reproductive rights to MLF's postcolonial amnesia and inability to connect non-white oppression to white privilege (white French women could own slaves before they could vote, remarks Vergès).

Thus, while radical approaches to intersectionality center “the experiences of subjects whose voices have been ignored”¹¹ and promote the visibility and self-representation of intersectionally invisibilized groups, they also simultaneously deconstruct the very idea of certain groups being intersectional as an illusion stemming from white epistemic privilege, androcentrism, and all other social processes reproducing hegemonic invisibility.¹² As a consequence, the classic debate over “who is intersectional” is not merely an “unresolved theoretical dispute” over “whether intersectionality is a theory of marginalized subjectivity or a generalized theory of identity”.¹³ Rather, it turns out to be significant for how marginalized positions themselves will be formulated and exposes the interdependency between marginalization processes and social constructions of complexity.

⁹ bell hooks, *Homeplace (a site of resistance)*, in: hooks, *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*, Boston 1990.

¹⁰ VERGÈS (footnote 2).

¹¹ NASH, *Feminist review* (footnote 7), 3.

¹² SÉBASTIEN CHAUVIN/ALEX JAUNAIT, *L'intersectionnalité contre l'intersection*, *Raisons Politiques*, 56, 2015, 55-74.

¹³ NASH, *Feminist review* (footnote 7), 10.

III. Beyond asymmetrical constructions of complexity

Yet, in many contemporary social science accounts of intersectionality, especially in postcolonial Europe, this radical deconstructive potential is often lost. It is replaced by the widespread academic practice of merely pointing at certain women – with a sustained focus on Muslim women wearing headscarves – as being at the intersection of several discriminations, as having specific problems as opposed to generic problems.

Instead of having one problem, it goes, these women have two problems (or more). Given the semantic proximity in political discourse between having a problem and being one, stigmatized groups are thus not untypically framed at once as being “at risk” and risks themselves.¹⁴ Thus, having two problems all too easily translates into being very problematic. Instead of being simply other, women of color are othered twice: they become other *within* otherness. Not only are they different, but twice different, twice “out of place”.¹⁵

As Sara Ahmed and others have shown, whiteness remains the background to many framings of otherness even when the latter purport to fight discrimination or promote diversity. Whereas whiteness can be centered in the very movement of making it the central object of critique, there are also many ways of reproducing whiteness as “the behind”¹⁶ while seemingly centering the oppressed. In the words of Richard Dyer, “looking with such passion and single-mindedness at nondominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human.”¹⁷

Pointing to racially oppressed women and other minorities as specifically “intersectional” may contribute to solidifying the equation of whiteness with universality and to ironically “resecuring the centrality of the subject positioning of white women”.¹⁸ In this usage, adds Jasbir Puar, “intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman of Color”.¹⁹ Humanitarian investments in the double otherness of

¹⁴ CLAUDIA ARADAU, The Perverse Politics of Four-Letter Words: Risk and Pity in the Securitization of Human Trafficking, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33(2), 2004, 251-227.

¹⁵ SARAH AHMED, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, New York 2000.

¹⁶ SARAH AHMED, A Phenomenology of Whiteness, *Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 2007, 149-168, 156.

¹⁷ RICHARD DYER, *White, Screen*, 29(4), 1988, 44-64, 44.

¹⁸ PUAR, *Philosophia* (footnote 4), 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

non-white women may simply reiterate white receptors' own racialized experience and representations of these women, possibly accounting for the relatively smooth way that these versions of intersectionality have been welcome in white liberal policy circles. "Despite decades of feminist theorizing on the question of difference, difference continues to be 'difference from' that is, the difference from 'white woman'", concludes Puar, leading to the "ironic othering of WOC through an approach that meant to alleviate such othering".

This critique of ironic othering can be extended to the very metaphor of the intersection. Indeed, rather than undoing asymmetrical constructions of complexity, the geometric metaphor of "intersection-ness" can be shown to reiterate this hierarchy by further naturalizing it. Emblematically, one often hears or reads variously elaborate equivalents of the following formula: "Intersectionality says Black women are not only women. They are also Black". Through these formulations, white women are again negatively produced as being just women, women who do not have to confront race, as they are not "concerned" by racism. Thus, the liberal version of intersectionality risks participating in the rhetorics of aberration through the very language of intersection. Indeed, behind the opposition between simple and complex oppressions lies the hierarchy between the universal and the particular, between universal (unintersected) gender issues and particular (intersectional) ones, the latter being thought of as intertwined with the problems of other groups – the Other's groups.

While theories of intersectionality are often pitted against arithmetic imaginaries of domination, their relation to *geometric* imaginaries have been more ambivalent, as scholars and activists have endeavored to make the intersection visible while simultaneously undoing the very illusion of the intersection. Depending on context and strategies, works deploying intersectionality to describe multiply subordinated groups have thus oscillated on a continuum between the restorative enterprise and the critical one.

IV. Which intersectionality in a context of punitive hyper-visibility?

In the context of the United States, whether the target of "intersectional-type" work²⁰ was the marginalization of women in 1970s Black power movements or the

²⁰ RITA DHAMON, Considerations on mainstreaming intersectionality, *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(1), 2011, 230-243.

invisibilization of the concerns of Black women in the mainstream feminist movements of the same period, making Black women *visible* understandably became a crucial political and theoretical fight. And deconstructing the illusion of intersection-ness could remain secondary or be put into brackets.

By contrast, the situation in contemporary Europe significantly complicates the questions of visibility and invisibility. The case of Europe's Muslim women is illustrative here, as the latter have been pivotal to intersectional thinking on this side of the Atlantic in the 2000s and 2010s, more so than in North America, with the exception of French Canada.²¹ It also exemplifies the disparity between the two political contexts.

Indeed, Muslim women in Europe have not been primarily invisibilized but, on the contrary, have found themselves *hyper-visible* by Islamophobic paranoia.²² They have been made hyper-visible as the very emblem of the "problem" of Islam, by being framed at once as its main vector, the symbol of their group's collective cultural otherness, and its chief victims. Their clothing has been constructed as inherently ostentatious.²³ The homogenization and stabilization of the meaning of the headscarf in the Islamophobic imaginary (ironically marking racialized women as being both oppressed and unavailable to the white male gaze) simultaneously stabilized the meaning of its absence (marking other women as at once not oppressed *and* available to white male appropriation), thus also participating in the sexist and racist construction of gendered whiteness.²⁴ In most of continental Europe, mainstream integration discourses address Muslim women, presented as victims of Islam, as those in a privileged position to lead postmigrant communities into the national ambit, through their emancipation implicitly or explicitly framed as leaving Islam.²⁵

In the mainstream European political imaginary, Muslim women are thus decidedly *complicated women*. One could even say that they are *racialized* as complicated, inherently complicated. They are assigned the complicated slot. Yet, although Muslim women are interpellated as particularly problematic by contemporary postcolonial

²¹ See ELÉONORE LÉPINARD, *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times*, New York 2020.

²² ALIA AL-SAJI, *Voiles racialisés: la femme musulmane dans les imaginaires occidentaux*, *Les ateliers de l'éthique/The Ethics Forum*, 3(2), 2008, 39-55.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ CHRISTINE DELPHY, *Antisexisme ou antiracisme? Un faux dilemme*, *Nouvelles questions féministes*, 25(1), 2005, 59-83.

²⁵ NACIRA GUÉNIF-SOUILAMAS/ÉRIC MACÉ, *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*, Paris 2004; MARGUERITE VAN DEN BERG/JAN WILLEM DUYVENDAK, *Paternalizing mothers: Feminist repertoires in contemporary Dutch civilizing offensives*, *Critical Social Policy*, 32(4), 2012, 556-576.

discourse, as we know, this mechanism of disciplinary hyper-visibility is not new. It has been a staple of the history of European colonialism, which has long problematized colonized women as minorities within minorities, a group colonized by the colonized (men) who could be performatively recruited as symbols of the internal contradictions and diverging interests of the colonized, especially in times of mounting anti-colonial aspirations. Oft cited are Frantz Fanon's famous account of late colonial ceremonies of public "unveiling" of indigenous women in colonial Algeria,²⁶ or Gayatri Spivak's no less famous analysis about white men's fantasies of saving brown women from brown men in colonial India under British domination.²⁷

The message here is clear: colonial and racist powers did not wait for intersectional movements to "theorize" intersectionality in their own ways and for their own purposes. Indeed, they knew very much how to constitute Muslim women as a visible, problematic but productive intersection in order to fight anti-colonial insurrection. "I am tempted to say ... that we may find the first interactionalists among settlers and racists", Houria Bouteldja²⁸ ventures to suggest. "Indeed, they are the first ones who imagined what they could make of contradictions observed in colonized societies", whether by "tak[ing] advantage of the statutory difference between Jews and Muslims in Algeria" or by benefiting from "the patriarchal organization of Maghreb societies". Thus "they could and did use these contradictions to split the social body as much as possible between Jews, Arabs, Berbers, men and women, elites and peasants, etc." These observations have led Bouteldja to propose distinguishing between a "repressive use" type of intersectionality, which she associates with colonialism and sexual nationalism, and an "emancipatory use" type promoted by racialized women's movements²⁹.

²⁶ FRANTZ FANON, *Algeria Unveiled*, in: FANON, *A Dying Colonialism*, New York 1965, 35-64.

²⁷ GAYATRI SPIVAK, *Can the subaltern speak?*, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (ed.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana 1988.

²⁸ HOURIA BOUTELDJA, "Race, Class and Gender: A New Three-Headed Divinity", 16 January 2016, <http://indigenes-republique.fr/race-class-and-gender-a-new-three-headed-divinity/>

²⁹ *Ibid.* For an analogous contrast between "exclusive" and "inclusive" intersectionality, see BIRGIT SAUER/BIRTE SIIM, *Inclusive political intersections of migration, race, gender and sexuality – the cases of Austria and Denmark*. *NORA Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(1), 2020, 56-69.

V. Symbolic overdetermination vs. semantic underdetermination

However, far from a clear-cut distinction, the two versions can at times be porous. Framings can easily shift from one type to another, not because of hidden colonial intents by progressive users and promoters of intersectional language, but due to the open semantic emptiness of the intersection. Indeed, in spite of their tensions and outright incompatibilities, or perhaps through them, those opposed framings, political fights, and intellectual projects may jointly contribute to constructing and stabilizing the intersection's equivocal political relevance.

In the European context, frame porousness is thus an all the more conspicuous prospect as any project of "making the intersection visible" risks replicating colonial interpellations of indigenous women. Indeed, the figure of the intersection, that of the minority within the minority, has long been a site of lucrative symbolic investment by many opposing parties over the past centuries, whether they are colonial or anti-colonial, feminist or anti-feminist, whether they pertain to self-definitions or hetero-definitions.

The consequence of this is a paradox. On the one hand, the intersection is symbolically overdetermined. It is collectively constructed as "good to think". The intersection must speak or, most often, be spoken. On the other hand, it is semantically underdetermined. That is, its political meaning remains uncertain and constitutes the very object of symbolic struggles between dominant and dominated groups – while most nevertheless agree on its relevance. The contemporary case of LGBT+ people of color is quite illustrative in this regard. The sheer existence of LGBT+ people of color can be subject to at least four different political framings, by insiders as well by outsiders, for various hegemonic and counter-hegemonic purposes. It can be marshaled as a testimony to racism in LGBT+ communities; conversely, it can be made to exemplify diversity in the same LGBT+ communities; it can be summoned to testify to homophobia in communities of color; or, conversely, to exemplify sexual and gender diversity in the same communities of color.

The simultaneity of symbolic overdetermination and semantic emptiness is of course not a true paradox, as the two are tied by a relationship of mutual interdependency: it is through contradictory political overinvestments in the intersection that the intersection at once becomes hyper-relevant and remains ultimately underdefined, both in the social world and in academic production. Conversely, semantic openness makes the intersection particularly prone to being variously and contradictorily invested. Yet, far from an insurmountable obstacle, such underdetermination is in fact a powerful engine of contentious politics. Openness is what allows collective action to change symbols,

meanings and representations as much as it is changed by them. Perhaps, then, rather than being signs of weakness or of constitutive ambiguity, symbolic struggles over the meaning of the intersection may simply be there to be won.

VI. Conclusion

Deployments of intersectionality are so diverse as to question the very ambition of delimiting a distinct yet coherent “field” of intersectionality studies.³⁰ Theories of intersectionality have shined the spotlight on legal, political, and discursive processes that reduce disadvantaged groups to the particular experience of the least oppressed among category members, making other members appear as if they, and they only, were located at the intersection with another group. Rather than dividing between complex and simple oppressions, these theories may be deployed to unmake the intersectional metaphor and problematize every subject position as complex – whether through privilege, discrimination, or the non-linear combination of both. Yet, if intersection-ness is a social construction, like all social constructions it is real in its consequences. As we saw, abstract categories and asymmetrical constructions of complexity carry real-life challenges for multiply oppressed individuals and groups. But how can these challenges be accounted for through the language of intersectionality without reinforcing the asymmetry?

This chapter has examined some of the social science and political challenges of describing concrete configurations of oppression and othering without attributing intersections to the groups afflicted by them. Rather than posit that spotlighting the intersection is always progressive or politically subversive, it expanded the field of inquiry to reinsert progressive deployments of intersectionality within a broader field of intersectional interpellations and assignations³¹ where the ultimate meaning and effect of the deployment is not given in advance, even as the intersection is pre-constructed as “good to think”.

In the final analysis, insisting on difference in difference, oppression within oppression, may neither be progressive or conservative as such and may variously relate to the scopic matrix of hegemonic white invisibility. The longer-term, colonial and

³⁰ SUMI CHO/KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW/LESLIE MCCALL, *Toward a field of intersectionality studies. Theory, applications, and praxis*, *Signs*, 28(3), 2013, 785-810.

³¹ SARAH MAZOUZ, *Faire des différences. Ce que l’ethnographie nous apprend sur l’articulation des modes pluriels d’assignation*, *Raisons Politiques*, 58, 2015, 75-89.

postcolonial genealogy of imposed intersectional visibility in Europe makes the deconstructive, radical approach to intersectionality perhaps all the more urgent than in other regional contexts. Unless it takes that road more fully, the liberal version of intersectionality will continue to be widely accepted for the wrong reasons and will risk remaining part and parcel of the apparatus of contemporary European whiteness.