INTERSECTIONALITY UNDONE

Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies[1]

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Abstract

This article identifies a set of power relations within contemporary feminist academic debates on intersectionality that work to "depoliticizing intersectionality," neutralizing the critical potential of intersectionality for social justice-oriented change. At a time when intersectionality has received unprecedented international acclaim within feminist academic circles, a specifically disciplinary academic feminism in tune with the neoliberal knowledge economy engages in argumentative practices that reframe and undermine it. This article analyzes several specific trends in debate that neutralize the political potential of intersectionality, such as confining intersectionality to an academic exercise of metatheoretical contemplation, as well as "whitening intersectionality" through claims that intersectionality is "*the brainchild of feminism*" and requires a reformulated "*broader genealogy of intersectionality*."

Keywords: Intersectionality, Academic Feminism, Disciplinarity, Neoliberalism, Diversity, Postrace, Europe (Germany, France)

INTRODUCTION

This article identifies a set of power relations within contemporary feminist academic debates on intersectionality that work to "depoliticizing intersectionality," neutralizing the critical potential of intersectionality for social justice-oriented change. The overarching motivation behind the article is to explicate how intersectionality—despite receiving unprecedented international acclamation within feminist academic circles—has been systematically depoliticized. I seek to counteract this trend by encouraging methods of debate that reconnect intersectionality with its initial vision of generating counter-hegemonic and transformative knowledge production, activism, pedagogy, and non-oppressive coalitions. I begin by providing two anecdotes to illustrate the complex workings (or absence) of intersectionality in social practice, using the Occupy movement and SlutWalk. I go on to examine the practices through which a kind of disciplinary academic feminism specifically attuned to neoliberal knowledge economy contributes to the depoliticization of intersectionality. I analyze several specific trends in this debate that work to neutralize the political potential of intersectionality, such as confining intersectionality to an academic exercise of metatheoretical contemplation, as well as "whitening intersection-

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ality" through claims that intersectionality is "*the brainchild of feminism*," and that it requires a reformulated "*broader genealogy of intersectionality*."

Recent years have seen various movements with claims about social justice and democratization sweeping across the world, from the *Indignados* to the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, SlutWalk, and the transnational student movement. However inspiring they may be, these contemporary progressive politics of protest have not escaped the enduring problems of legitimacy and representation, in particular the intricacies of speaking about, for and instead of others (Alcoff 1995). Despite their best intentions and claims of inclusiveness and solidarity, many have fallen short of intersectional reflexivity and accountability, and prompted their own kinds of silencing, exclusion or misrepresentation of subordinated groups. Here I draw on the Occupy movement and Slutwalk to illustrate the need for constant reflection about intersectionality and non-oppressive coalitional politics.

The Occupy movement has been challenged for lacking decolonial awareness by Aboriginal peoples from an anticolonialist and indigenous-centered perspective (Montano 2011; Yee 2011). Critics argue that its rallying motto—"Occupy"—discursively re-enacts colonial violence and disregards the fact that, from the indigenous standpoint, those spaces and places it calls for occupation are *already* occupied. The Aboriginal critique developed a "decolonize occupy movement" wherein indigenous people hold center stage. Despite being much less publicized, the critique has succeeded in changing the name of the Occupy movement at least in some parts of the world.

The SlutWalk movement,[2] organized to protest the shaming and blaming of women for wearing clothing that invited sexual assaulted, received criticism for its racial blindness: its lack of concern about the differential resonance of the term "slut" for Black women of the United States. Historically-sedimented gender stereotypes have persistently pathologized Black female sexuality as improper and promiscuous. Stepping away from SlutWalk, Black women's organizations poignantly asserted that:

> As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves "slut" without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don't have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations (Black Women's Blueprint 2011).

This collective demand for the relabeling of the movement has not been successful. For example, during a NYC SlutWalk on October 1, 2011, at least two young White women were photographed with placards reading: "Woman is the N* of the world" (referencing a John Lennon and Yoko Ono song and using the full racial slur). While organizers issued an apology for this racist incident,[3] the incident nonetheless demonstrates that even movements positioning themselves as progressive can *still* lose sight of the tools that intersectional thinking makes available (see Bilge 2012; Carby 1982; Rich 1979).[4] Such incidents demonstrate Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1993) argument that "political strategies that challenge only certain subordinating practices while maintaining existing hierarchies not only marginalize those who are subject to multiple systems of subordination but also often result in oppositionalizing race and gender discourses" (pp. 112–113).

These examples illustrate that despite their claims of inclusiveness, progressive movements can fail in intersectional political awareness. This failure comes at a significant cost for various subordinated groups, which are silenced, excluded, mis-

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represented, or co-opted. In the present-day political landscape the need for a *radical* intersectional praxis may be more pressing than ever. Intersectional political awareness offers critical potential for building non-oppressive political coalitions between various social justice-oriented movements now required to compete with each other, rather than collaborate, under the neoliberal equity/diversity regime.

RETHINKING INTERSECTIONALITY IN AN AGE SATURATED WITH A NEOLIBERAL CULTURE OF DIVERSITY

Ideas about social justice infuse everyday life in complex and contradictory ways, through popular and corporate discourses and practices (Ward 2007). At the same time underlying structures that produce and sustain social inequalities are overlooked and erased. Commonplace discourses assume that western societies have largely overcome problems of racism, sexism, and heterosexism/homophobia. Political myths of "posts" (postraciality, postfeminism) and fantasies of transcendence (Ahmed 2004) are espoused by both liberal and conservative forces. The result is a contradictory political and cultural climate replete with idea(l)s of equality, accompanied by an unbending refusal to see the persistence of deeply entrenched inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship-status. Framing social life not as collective, but as the interaction of individual social entrepreneurs, neoliberalism denies preconditions leading to structural inequalities; in consequence, it congratulates itself for dismantling policies and discrediting movements concerned with structures of injustice. Thus neoliberal assumptions create the conditions allowing the founding conceptions of intersectionality—as an analytical lens and political tool for fostering a radical social justice agenda—to become diluted, disciplined, and disarticulated.

Pervasive neoliberal notions have facilitated feminism being altered into "post-feminism" in ways that parallel the current depoliticizing of intersectionality. According to Angela McRobbie (2009), "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (p. 12). Intersectionality is going through a similar "double entanglement" (p. 6), as it is "hailed" and "failed" simultaneously; some elements of intersectionality are taken into account, but only to be declared lapsed or obsolete, to be set aside for something better. Certain lines of feminist debate both invoke and evacuate intersectionality as post-feminism did feminism.

This double entanglement serves important purposes for the circulation of diversity rhetorics across the academy, progressive social movements, and non-profit and corporate organizations. Intersectionality, originally focused on transformative and counter-hegemonic knowledge production and radical politics of social justice, has been commodified and colonized for neoliberal regimes. A depoliticized intersectionality is particularly useful to a neoliberalism that reframes all values as market values: identity-based radical politics are often turned into corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals (Ward 2007); a range of minority struggles are incorporated into a market-driven and state-sanctioned governmentality of diversity (Duggan 2003); "diversity" becomes a feature of neoliberal management, providing "managerial precepts of good government and efficient business operations" (Duggan 2003, p. xiii); knowledge of "diversity" can be presented as marketable expertise in understanding and deploying multiple forms of difference simultaneously—a sought-after signifier of

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sound judgment and professionalism (Ward 2007). Given the range of deployments available for it, intersectionality has become an "open," umbrella term used in different, even divergent, debates and political projects, both counter-hegemonic and hegemonic (Erel et al., 2008).

The mutations of intersectionality and its depoliticizing rest not merely on the economic logics of neoliberalism, but also on its cultural logics, particularly the ability of neoliberalism to speak a *complex* language of diversity. One of the key features of neoliberalism is its extension of the economic rationale beyond the economic sphere to saturate all aspects of life. As Oishik Sircar and Dipika Jain (2012) point out astutely, neoliberalism has slickly achieved three things to ensure its robust longevity: "first, it has enabled the mutation of the state into a firm; second, it has given birth to the responsibilised and self-governing citizen; third, it has constantly projected experiences of human precarity and risk as entrepreneurial/developmental/funding opportunity" (pp. 11–12). These adaptions are infused with social identities and categories. Lisa Duggan (2003) argues that alliances built by neoliberal politicians to assist the flow of money up the economic hierarchy are complex, flexible, and shifting, yet the contexts of their concretion are always forged by "the meanings and effects of race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of difference" (p. xiv). In other words, Duggan insists,

> these alliances are not simply opportunistic nor are the issues merely epiphenomenal or secondary to the underlying reality of the more solid and real economic goals. Rather, the economic goals have been (must be) formulated *in terms of the* range of political and cultural meanings that shape the social body in a particular time and place (p. xvi, italics in original).

Intersectionality has been transformed by the confluence between neoliberal corporate diversity culture and identity politics in the last fifteen years and also acquired undeniable intellectual, political, and moral capital (Knapp 2005; Ward 2007), which proved to be a fertile ground for opportunistic uses of intersectionality that I have dubbed "ornamental intersectionality" (Bilge 2011, p. 3). It would be misleading to consider ornamental intersectionality as benign, for it is part and parcel of the neutralization, even active disarticulation, of radical politics of social justice. Its superficial deployment of intersectionality undermines intersectionality's credibility and potentials for addressing interlocking power structures and developing an ethics of non-oppressive coalition-building and claims-making. Similar to routine declarations of commitment to equity and diversity, ornamental intersectionality allows institutions and individuals to accumulate value through good public relations and "rebranding" without the need to actually address the underlying structures that produce and sustain injustice (Ahmed 2012; Luft and Ward, 2009). Recast in depoliticized terms, intersectionality becomes a tool that certain feminist scholars can invoke to demonstrate "marketable expertise" in managing potentially problematic kinds of diversity.

Part of my task in this article is to answer a vital question with regard to how a depoliticized intersectionality is achieved and "managed" by academic feminism. Through what kind of practices does academic feminism participate in this paradoxical process of co-optation: invoking intersectionality (or a specter of intersectionality) so that it might be stripped of its radical vision of social justice—rendering it politically neutralized and undone? I discuss below a number of argumentative patterns and trends through which intersectionality is deliberately neutralized. The problematic strategies I discuss do not characterize the arguments of *all* academic

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feminisms, but are deployed in a kind of scholarship that I call *disciplinary feminism*. By disciplinary feminism, I refer to a hegemonic intellectual position with regards to knowledge production, a way of doing "science" which is more concerned with fitting into the parameters of what constitute legitimate scientific knowledge than challenging those parameters. It strives to install disciplinarity over the object of study, to be recognized within traditional disciplines, or to establish itself as a new discipline or interdiscipline. This is unlike the initial political impetus of academic feminism, which conceived itself as a "means to institutionalize feminist resistance to the normalizing agencies of the traditional disciplines" (Wiegman 2012, p. 71), and many academic feminists still engage in a critique of the disciplines, attempt to challenge hegemonic practices in scholarship and public life. Disciplinary feminism, in contrast, participates in institutional (mis)appropriation and attendant depoliticization of both interdisciplinarity and intersectionality.

Disciplinary feminism appears to be more concerned with the institutional success of the knowledge it produces than institutional and social change through counter-hegemonic knowledge production. Hence, today's disciplinary feminism uses the very tools that unruly feminist knowledge projects of the 1970s and early 1980s attempted to critique. These were radically political intersectional knowledge projects that resisted the standardized visions and normalizing techniques promoted in the name of disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity. Contemporary scholars cannot fully retrieve themselves from the market logics and practices of the neoliberal university; we all must, to some degree, tackle neoliberal demands for branding, product differentiation, and emphasizing novelty. Yet, this does not mean we are obliged to espouse the kind of work I call disciplinary feminism, which conflates political struggles and identities with market niches, and contributes to the depoliticizing of intersectionality.

More broadly, differentiating academic feminism from disciplinary feminism also highlights deep contradictions: initially insurgent formations of fields such as women's studies, ethnic studies, gay and lesbian studies, and postcolonial studies were driven in part by the desire to disrupt scientific conventions and decolonize methodologies and epistemologies; yet their radical critiques are tamed through their institutionalization and dominant ideologies, as the operations of state and capital are deeply implicated in the processes allowing the emergence of counter-hegemonic minoritarian knowledges. Even as they contest power, these formations constantly strive to make themselves legible to power (Ferguson 2012, p. 38). The neoliberal recomposition of power alignments between state, capital, and academy subvert unprecedented forms of minority visibility by valorizing difference without consequences, recognition without redistribution. The minority perspectives created by counter-hegemonic fields of inquiry can then be rearticulated and incorporated into an ever adaptive hegemony without altering its structure (Ferguson 2012, p. 8; Bilge forthcoming).

My argument does not idealize the formative stages of intersectionality as unfettered by the workings of capital and state. Stuart Hall argues that new forms of global economic and cultural power work through an apparently paradoxical treatment of difference: "economic power . . . lives culturally through difference and . . . is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive other" (1997, pp. 180–181). Hall points out that just as new social movements developed around and articulated minority justice claims and identities, with their attendant counter-hegemonic knowledge projects, the flexible accumulation strategies of capitalism found ways to turn these new interests in local and minority difference into new market niches, promoting ever more segmented markets, smaller groups, niche

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lifestyles, and identities. Roderick Ferguson (2012) argues that the process has introduced "a new and powerful contradiction into society" (pp. 41–42): minority affirmation that elaborates decisive critiques of hegemonic authority also provides, through its institutionalization, unprecedented opportunities for the exercising of hegemonic power. Both intersectionality and feminism are bound up in this contradiction.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ACADEMIC (DISCIPLINARY) FEMINISM

In the last two decades, intersectionality has been celebrated by feminist scholars across the globe, receiving special praise and appreciation. It is said to be the "best feminist practice" in the academy (Weber and Parra-Medina, 2003, pp. 223–224); "the most important theoretical contribution of women's and gender studies to date" (McCall 2005, p. 1771); a catalyst for "the political impetus of feminism" (Knapp 2005, p. 254); "a globally utilized framework for understanding the issues of social justice" (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. xi); "one of the four principal perspectives of the third wave feminism" (Mann and Huffman, 2005, p. 57); and "a central tenet of feminist thinking [which] has transformed how gender is conceptualized in research" (Shields 2008, p. 301). Intersectionality is also used to assert the importance of the contribution of feminist knowledge to specific disciplines, as evidenced in the presentation of intersectionality as "a contribution of feminism to sociology" (Denis 2008, p. 677).

The steady popularity of intersectionality—leading to its deprecation as a "buzzword"—is further evidenced by the significant books, articles, symposia, and courses on the topic. Such unparalleled attention and large-scale international circulation also poses its share of problems. Similar to other "travelling theories" (see Saïd 1983) that move across disciplines and geographies, intersectionality falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation. Because the concept of intersectionality emerged as a tool to counter multiple oppressions, there are multiple narratives about its origins, as well as tensions over the legibility of its stakes. Introducing a knowledge product to new contexts implies a politics of translation and of "prefacing," generating its own celebrity system and status hierarchies both locally (in the context of translation) and internationally. Hierarchies are created when one establishes whose texts are deemed foundational and included in the translated "canon"; who gets invited to major scientific events where the new knowledge product is launched and confronted by local expertise; who gets the credit for introducing it; whose career benefits from it; who are included to be a part of local expertise, who is side-lined; who is empowered by this introduction, and who is not. Thus debates about intersectionality also reflect power struggles, opportunity structures, and turf wars internal to specific disciplines and fields.

These questions are of particular relevance in the case of intersectionality, as it is a theory and praxis, an analytical and political tool elaborated by less powerful social actors facing multiple minoritizations, in order to confront and combat the interlocking systems of power shaping their lives, through theoretical and empirical knowledge production, as well as activism, advocacy, and pedagogy (Thornton Dill and Zambrana, 2009). Given the origins of intersectionality, it is important to ask what the introduction of this particular tool does for similarly subordinated groups in the local context of its introduction. Are these groups and individuals empowered in some way by the availability of this tool? Or, are they disempowered because the new tool is introduced in ways that erase their own thoughts and activism, and their own political standpoint shaped by multiple power differentials? Are such individuals

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and groups involved in the introduction of intersectionality to the local context? Are they among the prime players? These are significant questions. My inquiry is not about worldwide circulations of a sanitized, overly academic, and depoliticized intersectionality *per se*, but about what difference the spread of a depoliticized intersectionality makes for subordinated groups within the power relations embedded in knowledge production.

I contend that what may at first appear to be an enthusiastic reception of intersectionality is a significant reflection of the need by disciplinary feminism to contain it, to neutralize its politics. For disciplinary feminism to "take on" or "take over" intersectionality serves to marginalize those trying to reconnect intersectionality with its initial vision which was grounded in the political subjectivities and struggles of less powerful social actors facing multiple intertwined oppressions. If disciplinary feminism establishes control of an intersectionality specifically at the expense of less powerful social actors, if intersectionality is incorporated specifically through the "curatorship" and benefit of White feminist scholars (see Erel et al., 2008; Petzen 2012), the result is a depoliticized intersectionality. To make this argument is not to say that White feminists should "move over" and leave intersectionality to feminists of color who will make it transformative and counter-hegemonic again. No! It is to argue that disciplinary feminists, whether White or of color, should stop doing intersectionality in ways that *undo* it. One way to undo intersectionality is to turn it into an overly academic exercise of speculative or normative musings.

DEPOLITICIZING INTERSECTIONALITY THROUGH METATHEORETICAL MUSINGS

There is a certain propensity in continental European feminist scholarship on intersectionality to discuss intersectionality without much empirical grounding. Those familiar with discussions of intersectionality in the North American context in particular notice a profusion of speculative and prescriptive declarations, sentences starting with "what intersectionality might or might not" be or do, and "what intersectionality should or should not" be or do. These musings fail to consider what intersectionality actually *does* in research, what researchers *do* with intersectionality, and with what kind of outcomes. This strong tendency runs the risk of confining intersectionality to an overly academic contemplative exercise. My own perplexity is echoed by Jennifer Petzen (2012), who expresses amazement at how *hard* the texts she analyzed *work* to make claims about the theoretical implications of intersectional analysis without ever applying it empirically. She notes:

> In other words, there seems to be a lot of talk about how to do intersectionality and what is the best way to theorise it, but the ways in which it has been taken up and given a particular genealogy cause one to think about how intersectionality is actually being applied, and what its actual function is in academic circles (p. 295).

The kinds of argumentative strategies I discuss in this article featured prominently at an important international conference, *Celebrating Intersectionality?* held in Frankfort in 2009 (see Lutz, Vivar, and Supik 2011).[5] The comments of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) in response to the conference reflect some of the divergent priorities and sensibilities when intersectionality travels from one context to the other. Pointing out that the conference organizers and participants appeared to approach intersec-

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tionality with assumptions, questions, and expectations that differed greatly from hers, Crenshaw notes:

> Indeed, the responses they anticipate—some definitive articulation of intersectionality's grand objectives, mechanisms, and trajectories—are quite foreign to my own sensibilities about intersectionality. My own take on how to know intersectionality has been to do intersectionality; to assess what intersectionality can produce is to canvass what scholars, activists and policymakers have done under its rubric. Thus, the invitation to measure and evaluate intersectionality as theory in the abstract has not drawn my engagement over the years. . . . I've consistently learned more from what scholars and activists have done with intersectionality than from what others have speculated about its appeal (p. 222).

I argue that widespread incidence of metatheoretical musings serves to undo intersectionality by distracting from its potential as a tool for social justice.

THE WHITENING OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Another way that intersectionality is undone is through argumentative patterns and trends that I gather under the rubric of *the whitening of intersectionality*. These patterns all participate in annexing intersectionality to disciplinary feminism and decentring the constitutive role of race in intersectional thought and praxis. Critical attention should be given to racial underpinnings of these argumentative strategies in the face of hegemonic discourse of "postraciality."

What I mean by "whitening intersectionality" does not refer to the embodiment, skin color or heritage of its practitioners, nor does it attempt to police the boundaries of who can legitimately do intersectionality and who cannot. Whether scholars are "whitening intersectionality" refers to ways of doing intersectional work in the political economy of genealogical and thematic re-framings, in the citational practices, and in the politics of canonicity. It is also dramatically evident in discussions of whether intersectionality should be seen as a theory or as merely a heuristic device, as well as in the recurrent calls for broadening and elevating intersectionality. These calls require critical reflection because they take place in a context that persistently devalues the theoretical significance of intersectionality when produced by feminists of color—the underlying assumption being that racialized women's structural experience cannot generate theory, it can only be understood as a descriptive category of experience (Lewis 2009, Erel et al., 2008).

Thus the whitening of intersectionality is achieved in part by excluding from debate or overlooking the contributions of those who have multiple minority identities and are marginalized social actors—women of color and queers of color. This problem is particularly acute in Europe (Erel et al., 2008; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010; Haritaworn 2012; Lewis 2009, 2013; Petzen 2012; Tomlinson 2013). While the whitening of intersectionality is produced through several lines of argument, I focus here on two: "*intersectionality is the brainchild of feminism*" and "*we need to broaden the genealogy of intersectionality*."

I analyze these two argumentative strategies from an intellectual tradition that unties *whiteness* from skin color, physiology, or biology, and understands it as: a structurally advantaged position (race privilege); a (privileged) standpoint from which White people view themselves, others, and society; and a set of cultural practices that are considered "unmarked"—yet unmarked only if viewed from the perspective of

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normative whiteness (Frankenberg 1993). My problematizing of the whitening of intersectionality thus builds on an understanding of whiteness as a social formation that is conditioned, reproduced and legitimized by a racial habitus—*a White habitus*. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) expands on Bourdieu's notion to develop the concept of White habitus: "a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings and emotions and their views on racial matters" (p. 104). This critical conception is necessary to understand and unpack the normalizing agency and authoritative power of whiteness, how it generates "norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself" (Frankenberg 1993, p. 231). While hegemonic positions are never entirely stable, hegemonic "White" ways of knowing and "White" entitlements are fully implicated in the feminist struggles for meaning over intersectionality and the forced take-over of intersectionality from feminists of color. Such a critical understanding of whiteness also clarifies that whiteness and whitening are symbolic fields. To be explicit—one does not need to be White to "whiten intersectionality."

Strategy One: "*Intersectionality is the Brainchild of Feminism*"

One of the most significant argumentative strategies to whitening intersectionality is the frequent casting of intersectionality as the "brain child of feminism." Claiming that feminism is responsible for creating intersectionality has become a normative, perfectly naturalized, taken-for-granted feminist practice, as evidenced by a plethora of writings, symposiums, and course programs in feminist intersectionality studies or intersectional gender studies, etc. Such reframing makes intersectionality a property specifically of feminism and women's/gender studies erasing "intersectionality's intersectional origins" (Luft and Ward, 2009, p. 19). A serious consequence of this appropriation is it downplays the centrality of race in the advent of intersectional thought and activism, while concurrently obscuring the formative tensions, both historical and contemporary, between feminism and women of color in the shaping of intersectionality. The appropriation of a whitened intersectionality needs to be countered by insistently emphasizing intersectionality's constitutive ties with critical race thinking and (re)claiming a non-negotiable status for race and the racializing processes in intersectional analysis and praxis. Recentering race in intersectionality is vital in the face of widespread practices that decenter race in tune with the hegemonic postracial thinking. Indeed, the chronic avoidance of race in European feminist debates on intersectionality is sobering. Barbara Tomlinson (2013) argues that decentering race facilitates dominant (White) feminist appropriation of intersectionality:

> Many European social scientists and philosophers concerned with feminist conceptions of intersectionality appear to find valuable a "purified" intersectionality, quarantined from its exposure to race. Establishing the Black feminist scholars who originated intersectionality as "unworthy"—parochial, "race-bound," incapable of "theorizing"—justifies extracting from them the valuable tool of intersectionality (p. 13).

Petzen (2012) insightfully discusses the importance of recentering race in the intersectionality debate. Analyzing the German context, Petzen argues that the practice of tying intersectionality to gender studies, rather than to postcolonial or antiracist

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critiques, unduly foregrounds gender as a category of analysis. According to Petzen (2012), this politics of location

> allows the concept of intersectionality to become palatable to white-dominated gender studies departments and universities, and made less threatening, especially when 'ethnicity' is substituted for 'race.' As such, the antiracist critique in European work on intersectionality tends to suffer at the hands of some theorists who tend to favour the other intersectional 'axes' of (white) gender and class, and recently sexuality [. . .] (p. 296).

European disciplinary feminism "whitens intersectionality" not only by making claims of property rights to the concept of intersectionality, but also by minimizing the importance of race in intersectional thought—for instance by declaring race an irrelevant category for Europe. This reflects a dominant tendency among European scholars: disallowing race as an analytic category, instead framing problems through categories such as ethnicity, culture, and religion. At the Frankfort conference *Celebrating Intersectionality?*, as Lewis (2013) notes, there was an anxious debate about whether the category of race had any real traction in European contexts, outside of Britain and the United States. These debates over the usefulness of the category of race reveal confident yet under-theorized and empirically underexamined dismissals of race, which end up silencing "those who cannot avoid knowing they are raced subjects" (Lewis 2013, pp. 882–883).

Another way of whitening intersectionality and downplaying the importance of race takes the form of dispersing and diffusing which basically bypass its origins in Black feminism. An example commonly asserted at European feminist conferences implies that intersectionality did not really originate in Black thought because "*it was in the air*." Particularly evident in the audio recordings of the conference *Celebrating Intersectionality?*, this claim that intersectionality "was in the air" rests on the tacit notion that if intersectional thinking emerged from everywhere, if "it was all in the air," then there is nothing specially racial or ethnic about intersectional thinking—or maybe we as feminists are *all* special, since we are all part of that nebula. Made from the outset at the inaugural speech of the conference, it has been taken up with (audible) ease by following speakers, each referring with a certain relief to its previous deployments. The happy consensus created by the "it-was-in-the-air-claim" needs to be disrupted, for it does several problematic things. It consolidates the *feminist* appropriation of intersectionality: "it was all in the internal effervescence of *feminism*." It emphasizes the stance that "feminists [have] theorize[d] intersectionality from many perspectives" (Lykke 2010, p. 78), consequently reducing the Black feminist thought and epistemologies of women of color that generated intersectionality to just "another perspective."

It is plausible to assume that these claims about intersectionality not having a clear source—having issued almost simultaneously from everywhere—are influenced by a Foucauldian power analytics, which is ironically distorted and misrepresented in these very claims. Indeed, Michel Foucault (1980) conceptualized power as "something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain . . . employed and exercised through a net like organization" (p. 98). Foucault was unwilling to identify a principle of domination or a primary source of power, or a subject or a group of subjects being always at the source of power. But this position does not sanction (or allow) an evacuation of the power relations at play in the very task of consolidating what counts as the legitimate knowledge about the origins of intersectionality.

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Indeed, by conceiving power as a system of relations dispersed throughout the society, rather than as a set of relations between those who "have" it (oppressors) and those who don't (oppressed), Foucault (1990) also insists that power "is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93) and can be exercised from an unexpected place. Thus, by dispersing the generative impetuses of intersectionality "in the air," disciplinary feminism not only lays claims of ownership of intersectionality, but also conveniently covers up its own strategic situation, and, I would add, its racial privilege (whiteness) in the struggles for meaning unfolding amongst feminist scholars and activists. As Lewis (2013) aptly notes, feminist intersectionality studies tend to overlook the often-muted racialized dynamics arising within feminist constituencies, "even as these constituencies are committed to deepening intersectionality scholarship and widening its political traction and influence" (p. 830). She adds,

> It is profoundly paradoxical, then, that this burgeoning arena of feminist inquiry has also redirected attention away from the relational dynamic that emerges among diverse constituencies of feminists and women's studies scholars in feminist gatherings. . . . This inquiry has neglected some of the very issues of inequality and differentiated subjectivities constituted in intersectional matrices as they are played out in the space of feminist infrastructure (p. 830).

The inaccuracy of the "it was in the air" claims made by several European and, particularly German feminists, becomes glaringly obvious when we turn our gaze to other evidence about conceptualizing race and gender in earlier German contexts. For example, claims that whatever was required for the articulation of intersectional thinking was already "in the air" prove to be fictitious in the light of testimonies heard in the inspiring film of Dagmar Schultz about Audre Lorde's Berlin years (Schultz 2012). This testimony reveals that in the 1980s there was no speaking position for a Black German *qua* Black German, no legibility for an articulation of an Afro German hyphenation. The development of such intersectional possibility clearly emerged from the personal and intellectual encounter between Lorde and a number of Germans of color striving for this articulation. This is established in the landmark work of Katharina Oguntoye and her colleagues on Afro German women, and also highlighted by Lorde herself in her preface to that volume. In the words of the authors, as quoted by Karin Obermeier (1989, p. 173):

> Together with Audre Lorde, we developed the term 'Afro-German' modelled after 'Afro-American,' as an expression of our cultural heritage. [It] is not and cannot be our intention . . . to create barriers according to heritage or skin color. . . . On the contrary, we want to advance the term 'Afro-German' against such traditionally expedient labels as 'half-breed,' 'mulatto,' or 'colored'—this, as an attempt to define ourselves, instead of being (externally) categorized (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 10).

If intersectionality were already "in the air," the role played by Audre Lorde would have been much less significant in the initial articulation of Afro German thought. When during the same period an Afro Dutch lesbian group decides to name itself "Sister Outsider," it was not a mark of infatuation with African American culture, but a move to acknowledge finding inspiration and models to articulate that which was unarticulated and unutterable in the local context—specifically *not* "in the air."

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Strategy Two: "*We Must Broaden the Genealogy of Intersectionality*"

The imperative to *broaden the genealogy of intersectionality* is a recurrent theme in European feminist conferences and publications. These calls cannot be understood outside the context of global circuits of knowledge production and dissemination wherein "inequalities of opportunity and recognition tied to structures of race, class, and gender remain, questions of provenance also remain central to the politics of knowledge production" (Lewis 2013, p. 872).

The call for broadening the genealogy of intersectionality was a notable theme at the 2009 Frankfurt conference *Celebrating Intersectionality?* Similar calls unfolded differently but with similar intensity in a large French-speaking feminist conference held in Lausanne in 2012. The unifying theme was *Interweaving of Power Relations: Discriminations and Privileges of Gender, Race, Class and Sexuality*.[6] At this conference pleas for broadening the genealogy of intersectionality also emphasized the related desire for "due recognition" of French feminist thought (both materialist and socialist/Marxist strands), which, it was claimed, had been tackling the "same issues" with different theoretical and conceptual tools. There is much to say about such a claim, but two points are specifically telling. First, it co-opts intersectionality (now deemed valuable) to rebrand a history of thought that was not tackling the "same issues," but was, rather, focussed on the class/gender nexus (or as French materialist feminists called it "social sex," or "social relationships of sex"). Race was not of concern.[7] Second, the calls were issued by White disciplinary feminists, in effect claiming that they have been "intersectionalists" all along. By insisting that their own tools—which place race to the side or make it optional—must be considered as valid and valuable as intersectionality—which was founded on a political standpoint inseparably racialized, gendered, and classed—they actively contribute to undermining intersectionality as a tool to be deployed for antiracist purposes. The entire argument turns on unacknowledged racial relations: scholars who are already beneficiaries of racial privilege, fail to acknowledge or hold themselves accountable for their racial privilege and, in fact, perpetuate it.

The whitening of intersectionality through "broadened genealogies" requires certain acrobatic skills: it entails juggling what is represented as *recognition* ("to honor founding mothers and foundational texts"), while simultaneously *pushing them into the background* so that other (usually White) mothers can be found, or other (usually White) genealogies be traced. In other words, attempts to reformulate genealogies are always political and never innocent. The organizers of the conference *Celebrating Intersectionality?* set forth their task as "looking back at the early stages of the debate about intersectionality with the intention of making visible research from those early days that is usually neglected in the current debate" (Lutz et al., 2011, p. 1). Such apparently generous moves are always in the service of contemporary structures of academic power. In the specific context of enunciation in debates on intersectionality within German gender studies, an interest in retrieving apparently underrated knowledge and knowledge producers from the past is not balanced by a due concern for those underestimated in the present, and for those who are *currently* being neglected and marginalized within the same field. Claiming to recuperate the work of the less powerful may serve simply as a pretext for inserting and amplifying the more powerful.

These endeavours to broaden intersectionality's genealogy rarely lead to the identification of newly rediscovered women of color as forerunners or "implicit" thinkers of intersectionality; instead White scholars such as Alexandra Kollontai (Lykke 2011), Zillah Eisenstein, and a whole range of socialist feminists are repack-

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aged as foundational to intersectionality. This gesture reduces and reformulates their otherwise valuable work on capitalism and patriarchy, serving merely to eclipse the racial habitus at the origin of intersectionality's theoretical innovation (Luft and Ward, 2009). This is not to say that intersectionality should not be related to, compared and contrasted with other ways of theorizing the complexity of power and structural inequalities. On the contrary, such comparisons and conversations are an integral part of theoretical developments. But they differ drastically from questionable moves listing an impressive cortège of White feminist scholars, including celebrated names such as Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Iris Young, Rosi Braidoti, etc., as overlooked key contributors to intersectionality. It is rather perplexing to misrepresent these well-known scholars as suffering a lack of recognition for their hypothetic contributions to intersectionality, as scholars who must be included in the intersectionality "canon" (Lykke 2010, pp. 72, 80, 81, 85; 2011, p. 213). It is rather disturbing that they are all White. The politics of genealogy and canonicity that add more White feminist forerunners or key contributors to intersectionality conveniently obliterate the fact that the political standpoint at the root of this theory and epistemology was constructed *oppositionally* to White feminism, not in tandem with it.

Applying an intersectional analytical lens to these acts of genealogical recalibration or displacement allows us to track down who is empowered and disempowered through them, what kind of citational practices they generate, with which consequences, and which scholars become the decisive gate operators to authorize the body of knowledge deemed the field's canon—a whole set of questions that point to the significance of the whitening of intersectionality. When these acts take place in a context wherein the category of race is disavowed and unutterable as it is in parts of Europe—a context David Goldberg (2006) shrewdly examines in his conceptualisation of *racial Europeanization*[8]—their implications are serious. They contribute, perhaps unwittingly, to cast European feminists and queers of color "outside Europe as a multinational formation, and indeed outside the community of feminist scholars and theory makers who reside in or take Europe as their object of inquiry" (Lewis 2013, p. 875).

A growing body of critical work on contexts such as Germany and France demonstrates that disciplinary feminism governs the contemporary knowledge field of intersectionality through invalidating knowledge produced outside the academy or subjugating it as a "pre-theoretical raw material" (Haritaworn 2012, p. 16), through whitening intersectionality and excluding or marginalizing racialized postcolonial scholars and activists who are the local knowledge producers on intersectionality. For instance, in discussing the reception of intersectionality in Germany by the network of academic feminism (i.e., gender studies), Umut Erel and her colleagues (2008) argue that the contributions of women of color and migrant women to debates on intersectionality are rarely included in institutional academic production. Indeed, reading what is considered the intersectionality scholarship in the German context creates the false impression that there are no racialized scholars and activists, no antiracist feminists and queers of color capable of contributing to this literature, while in reality these actors were the first to articulate an intersectionality thought and praxis in this context (Erel et al., 2008; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010; Haritaworn 2012; Petzen 2012). The outcome of excluding and subjugating the knowledge produced by racialized Germans from the academic sphere fosters a false history, and creates the misconception that intersectionality was introduced to Germany in 2005 by White German feminist scholars (Petzen 2012)—a misconception repeated and consolidated in subsequent publications. For example, in a recent article seeking to map the current intersectionality debate in German-speaking countries, Ina Kerner

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(2012) discusses *only* the work of White feminists as structuring the field. This posture seems to reflect deep-seated disregard and denial by German mainstream feminism and women's/gender studies with regard to debates and interventions made by Black women and migrant women, who were already arguing in late 1980s that their lives were "shaped by a confrontation with a complex web of multiple contradictions" (Erel et al., 2008, p. 211).

Similarly, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) draws our attention to unacknowledged elisions and erasures undergirding the entree of intersectionality in the German context and emphasizes that marginalized voices articulated local thinking and activism on intersectionality long before it was encountered by German disciplinary feminism. Importantly, she pinpoints a contradiction of the German debate on intersectionality which "simulates a genuine interest in understanding the multidimensionality of gender," while simultaneously ignoring the local debates "led by migrant, exilic, Jewish and Black feminists, that had already proposed this perspective in the 1980s (p. 56). Moreover, the highly academic debate—disconnected from both empirical applications of intersectionality and its political praxis—that appears to be taking place among German-speaking gender studies scholars seldom mentions scholars' own positionality and racial privilege (Petzen 2012), thus failing to follow a central tenet of intersectionality—attending to standpoint. Ignoring the counter-discourse and -memory that these racialized scholars and activists produce clearly contribute to turning intersectionality into a hegemonic knowledge project. In this context, it is no coincidence that many of these racialized scholars who provide insight into the power relations and racial dynamics involved in the "introduction" of intersectionality to German gender studies live and work outside Germany (in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Turkey, for example).

This is a grim irony: a tool elaborated by women of color to confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of antiracist movements, becomes, in another time and place, a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialized women at bay.

The framing of subordinate groups as incapable of understanding and interpreting their own oppression and consequently of articulating their own tools of resistance, is, of course, not specific to Germany. Similar discourses are found elsewhere in Europe, for instance in France. Recent work produced in France by postcolonial/decolonial scholars such as Fatima Ait Ben Lmadani and Nasima Moujoud (2012), and Houria Bouteldja (2013) indicate that similar forces and rationales are at play. Postcolonial scholars and activists strive to articulate crucial critiques of hegemonic feminism as well as other disciplines and fields dealing with "minority issues." Despite constant delegitimation, they argue that settings presented as progressive can be oppressive and discriminatory for racialized scholars. I am indebted to Nasima Moujoud for drawing my attention, in a personal communication, to a quasi-colonial benevolence and paternalism that in some cases accompanies the translation of Black feminist or postcolonial texts in the French context: "but we are doing this for you [Arabs, Blacks] so that you can have the tools to think, to articulate your oppression." This is a deep-seated racist misconception masquerading as progressive generosity and hiding the career benefits that accrue to those making the generous gift. Painfully ironic in the case of the whitening of intersectionality is that it is the translation/introduction of Black feminist knowledge—which is built on the creation by Black women of a self-defined (political) standpoint on their own oppression (Collins 1989, pp. 746–747)—that becomes the very

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site of the denial of the capacity of racialized French women (in particular Muslim women).

In sum, there is enough reason to tackle critically the politics of the "introduction" of intersectionality, including the politics of translation, of "prefacing," and so forth, in terms of their power effects—structurally, culturally, and disciplinarily, and on interpersonal levels (Collins 2000, 2009)—on the subordinate groups represented as the primary beneficiaries of this new knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The belated *entrée* of intersectionality to the august house of European disciplinary feminism has catalyzed existent struggles and power hierarchies and generated new ones, highlighting contradictions that reveal deep problems in the state of race in academic disciplinary feminism. One of these contradictions lies in the wish to acknowledge and restore past subjugated knowledge, while ignoring present-day subjugations. It bears emphasizing that redressing past subjugation generally requires little more than symbolic recognition, whereas redressing present subjugation entails power redistribution. In the European context where the category of race has been disarticulated and replaced by reference to ethnicity, culture, religion, and other categories, the present-day raciality seems increasingly beyond the limits of what can be thought and said. "Race" points only to a void. No category is available "to name a set of experiences that are linked in their production or at least inflection, historically and symbolically, experientially and politically, to racial arrangements and engagements" (Goldberg 2006, p. 335). As a result, denying the relevance of race to understand and confront power differentials becomes easier than doing the same with axes of power.

Another contradiction emerges when the tools of intersectional thinking are combined with the denial of race. One line of argument interprets intersectionality as insisting that "there is no such a thing as a purely racial/racist oppression, which is always already enmeshed with other categories, other axes of power." Such a stance invalidates radical anti-racism on the grounds that it singles out race and treats it "in isolation."[9] Obviously, this is misusing intersectionality to "trump" racial oppression, dismissing it *because* it never stands alone. But intersectionality does not entail a universal (i.e., undifferentiated and context-free) application of a static, almost dogmatic, rule to be applied to every form of knowledge and political organization dealing with oppression. On the contrary, the careful and conscious deployment of intersectionality requires us to take into account systemic disparities in social location. The indigenous critique of the Occupy movement and the critique of SlutWalk by Black women discussed in the introduction highlight the ways that some can use an injunction against intersectionality in order to create situations of exclusion and invisibility. Those who argue that there is no need to argue about racial oppression because such oppression is never "purely" racial are treating intersectionality in the abstract as a directive of universal application, for the specific purpose of suppressing discussion of racial oppression. Treating intersectionality as a universal rule disciplines and further delegitimizes forms of minoritarian knowledge and political organizing, which often *have had to* prioritize (albeit temporarily and strategically) single-issue approaches.

A third contradiction emerges when the analytic complexity of intersectionality is treated simplistically, rather than as a tool that does not serve the same purpose in different hands. One form this contradiction takes is to extract intersectionality

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from its acknowledgement of standpoint theory and its attendant critique of hegemonic understandings of scientific knowledge, distorting and misrepresenting intersectionality as an "objective" analytical tool (see Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud (2012) for a discussion of this with regard to the French academy). But careful intersectional thinking must always account for different meanings, purposes, and audiences. Intersectionality does not create a shopping list of categories that can be deployed to shut down discussion of specific oppressions ("yes, race is important, but what about . . . ?"). This interpretation of intersectionality as an imperative that all oppressions be countered always together is one strategy used to dilute the attention given to racism (Luft 2009), to serve as a method of deflection, of turning away from race (Ahmed 2012). Without suggesting that these "what about gender/sexuality/class?" questions are not legitimate, Sara Ahmed rightly points out that "given how hard it is to attend to race and racism, these questions can be used as a way of redirecting attention. In other words, when hearing about race and racism is too difficult, intersectionality can be deployed as a defense against hearing" (p. 195, n18).

To avoid a prescriptive, disciplinary use of intersectionality requires paying proper attention to historical contingencies, to specific contexts, and the purposes of specific arguments. Thinking intersectionally about how intersectionality is and should be deployed requires considering structural locations and power differentials. Those who use intersectionality as a universal device to be applied as an invariant rule may undermine the strategic planning of those who use intersectionality to contest specific concrete oppressions. Thinking intersectionally includes the possibility that *stepping back from intersectionality* may in some cases work as a strategy of empowerment for subordinated groups, as evidenced in the struggles of the PIR to articulate decolonial politics in France (Bouteldja 2013), or intervention/teaching strategies to raise the consciousness of dominant groups with regards to their naturalized privileges. As Rachel Luft (2009) argues, stepping back from intersectionality and the strategic use of race-only approaches might be necessary in our "postracial" times in the early stages of intervention and teaching aimed at encouraging Whites to recognize their racial privilege. The key question to be asked in this process is whether this stepping back is disempowering for other *subordinated* groups or not, whether it enhances or contributes in any way to their oppression? If the answer is yes, then we should, as Samuel Beckett (1983, p. 7) said, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." If it is (even faintly) disempowering for dominant groups without disempowering other subalterns, then we may perhaps consider it a provisionally successful strategy in its context.

To conclude, I would underline that the annexing of intersectionality by disciplinary feminism is by no means coincidental to the systematic marginalizing of racialized scholars and activists in contemporary debates and knowledge production on intersectionality. Reframing intersectionality as a creation of "feminism," an outcome of feminism's *internal* debates, effectively erases a landmark oppositionality from which intersectionality emerged: feminists of color confronting racism within feminism. In this disarticulated and rearticulated intersectionality, race also becomes optional, paving the way to similar oppressions and marginalizations, taking place this time not within feminism, but within feminist intersectionality studies.

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NOTES

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2. The SlutWalk movement began in Canada in April 2011 after a Toronto police constable told a group of students that women could avoid being sexual assaulted by not dressing like a "slut." Reversing stigma like many minority politics of protest, SlutWalk re-appropriates and re-signifies the term "slut" and urges women to protest in revealing attire. The movement has rapidly spread across the global north and south.
3. In their response to the indignation following the incident, the organizers stated: "SlutWalks around the world have been critiqued from anti-racist standpoints since the first Walk. We agree with many of these critiques, and have attempted to engage with them in our organizing. We recognize that under the banner of SlutWalk, we put logistics over politics in many cases, and that this was a failing. But now as we are moving forward, we realize that we cannot cultivate an identity as a coalition without upholding all of the intersecting identities of our organizers and participants" (http://slutwalknyc.tumblr.com/, accessed September 15, 2013). For a critique of the racial politics of SlutWalk, see The Crunk Feminist Collective (2011).
4. Another example of ineptness is revealed by pictures from a Berlin SlutWalk on September 15, 2012, which show several White young women in blackface and with black paint covering their bodies, leaving open only the eye area to imitate the niqab. Other women donned the niqab from the shoulders upward, with their naked torsos covered in black paint (Minh-Ha 2009).
5. Arguments about the conference that appear throughout this article are based on the co-edited conference proceedings (Lutz et al., 2011), other accounts (Lewis 2009, 2013; Petzen 2012), and audio recordings of presentations, in particular those of Helma Lutz, Nina Lykke and Cornelia Klinger (http://www.cgc.uni-frankfurt.de/intersectionality/audio.shtml, accessed August 21, 2012).
6. My translation from the original title: *Imbrication des rapports de pouvoir: discriminations et privilèges de genre, de race, de classe et de sexualité*, August 30–September 4, 2012, Lausanne.
7. Colette Guillaumin's work (1995) would be the exception to this generalization about race. However, her thought developed an analogical frame ("*imbrication*"), rather than a frame of interlocking/intersection/interweaving/co-formation/co-extension, her work considering race was not prominent at the conference—an omission which is in itself eloquent evidence of how optional is race in the current feminist debates on intersectionality (in particular but not exclusively in Europe).
8. See also Tomlinson (2013) for a compelling discussion of this context in relation to European intersectionality scholarship.
9. This attempt to deploy intersectionality to deflect attention from racial oppressions is discussed by activist Houria Bouteldja (2013), one of the spokespersons and founders of the Party of the Indigenous of the Republic (Parti des indigènes de la République (PIR)), a key organization of the decolonial movement in France. Bouteldja notes that French scholars have used intersectional thinking to object to the agendas and priorities of decolonial political struggles. Intersectionality, however, has no injunctions "forbidding" strategic attention to particular categories, for example, prioritizing a race-first approach rather than assuming the intersectionality requires all oppressions to be addressed simultaneously.

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