

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality

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A review of feminist scholars' writings on intersectionality makes evident that there is no consensus on whether intersectionality is a theoretical framework or a methodology. Nor do they agree whether the interrelating dynamics of various social locations and experiences are best captured by conceptualizing them as interlocking links, axes of difference, or interconnections, among other proposed approaches.¹ Though these debates are important to advancing feminist knowledge, I will not delve into them in this essay, focusing instead on the relevance of social justice to intersectionality. This is a powerful connection that we must continue to cultivate because social justice has always been a constituent element. The idea that inequality and privilege do not operate independently of each other and that our experiences of them are shaped by the interplay of our multiple social locations, such as gender, social class, and race, can also be traced back to the social justice work of feminists of color in the 1960s through the 1980s, who refused to suspend their radical critiques of gender inequality as well as other inequalities in their struggle for racial justice.² Even if some of them did not explicitly use the term "intersectionality," their activism and that of subsequent generations of feminists of color has made evident that social justice demands an intersectional practice. But how is an intersectional practice taken up in the name of social justice? What are the risks inherent in such an approach, and how do they matter? These are questions I regularly explore in conversations with other feminist scholars of color; therefore, it is primarily their experiences and insights I draw upon to consider some possible answers.

Among feminist scholars' critiques of knowledge production has been the disconnect between theory and practice. Feminists of color, in particular, have engaged in this critique in their articulations of themselves as scholars, their research foci, and the relevance of their intellectual labor to their communi-

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ties' struggles for social justice. Their approach to intersectionality as a practice linked to social justice is evidenced in their articulation of identities such as "insurgent Black intellectual" and "Xicanista," as well as practices such as that of "oppositional consciousness."³ Describing Black feminism as a social justice project, Patricia Hill Collins defines her work as intellectual activism and considers how engaged scholarship can remain oppositional.⁴ The commitment by feminist scholars of color to continue to enact intellectual labor that challenges unjust social, political, economic, and cultural arrangements can be carried out in different ways, but *all* entail an intersectional practice. I will focus on only two strategies—the assertion by feminist scholars of color of their intellectual labor's intended intervention, and the careful selection of sites in which to carry out their work—and as I show, both strategies also involve certain risks.

In an interview with *Ms. Magazine*, Black feminist cultural critic Michelle Wallace insightfully explains how necessity often leads women to feminism: "You don't get up and say, 'I can't wait to be a feminist.' You're kind of forced to it because you've been blocked. You decide that you have to fight."⁵ Other feminists of color have also expressed their intentionality when discussing their presence in academia and their scholarly contributions. We bring with us our knowledge of the complex interactions of our multiple social locations that we felt and had awareness of long before we were formally introduced to the language of intersectionality. We find that as women of color, we have always had to operate from an oppositional position throughout our intellectual trajectory, driven by our sense of responsibility to call out the exclusion of diverse perspectives and disrupt misinformed assumptions about our communities. Our intellectual labor, often originating from our positionality as women of color, becomes an intervention in the ways we have been studied and discussed by others. This intersectional practice is witnessed in how feminist scholars of color broaden the process of theory making, such as theorizing that begins from locations of pain and struggle with various forms of domination, theorizing from "the flesh," or operating from a "politics of love and rescue."⁶ Beginning from our location as feminist scholars of color entails taking a risk because there is always the possibility that our work will be dismissed as being too narrow in scope or simply personal. The intellectual gatekeepers with the power to make a determination about the merit of our work do not always appreciate the value of intersectionality as an analytical tool and as a practice by which to advance the equitable production and circulation of knowledge.

One of the ways in which feminist scholars of color resist being "blocked" by gatekeepers in their respective disciplines and fields is through decisions about where they situate their intellectual labor within academia. The classroom is a significant space in which we can purposefully incorporate intersectionality into our pedagogy to teach for social justice, challenging our students as well as ourselves to think and dialogue about the interconnections of various social

locations and to practice the application of intersectionality in our analyses. Another site in which we can ground our intersectional practice is within, outside, and/or across disciplines and fields. Here I use my experience to illustrate this point: my interest in the social mechanisms underlying inequality led me to sociology, where I have gained useful analytic tools, but I have always had to look outside the discipline also—especially to interdisciplinary fields such as gender and women’s studies and ethnic studies—to develop my approach to the study of Latina/o sexualities. This has occasionally led some to express concern that my work might not be read as sociological enough. The implications of such an assessment are a risk I am willing to take if it means I do not have to compromise my ability to define myself as a Latina feminist scholar or the work I will dedicate myself to in the context of academia. Rather than disengage with sociology, I approach my presence and work within it as a form of intellectual activism by which I challenge exclusionary practices within the discipline and encourage feminist dialogues across disciplines and fields.⁷ This is part of the intersectional practice of feminist scholars of color—when we enact our refusal to be made invisible or irrelevant, or to allow others to speak for us. However, I state this knowing that this is not possible for everyone to do within their respective disciplines or fields. My ability to claim sociology as one of my intellectual homes has been facilitated by the instrumental support of mentors and colleagues in sociology, but also by feminists of color outside the discipline who took the necessary risks to lay that groundwork. And some of these scholars have paid the price for forging these paths, such as by being denied tenure, having their intellectual contributions marginalized, or leaving the academy altogether (read: pushed out). Regardless of where and how one situates intellectual labor, engaged scholarship that is intended to be insurgent cannot be done in isolation if it is to be a sustainable component of social justice efforts.

We are most reminded of the importance of the sustainability of social justice work when we link our labor to that of activists and movements outside academia. I limit my comments to social justice work as it relates to youth, but this can apply to other efforts. The theme of “at risk” often surfaces in attempts to make sense of young people’s lives, particularly youth of color. Talk of their risks is overpowering—we hear that they are vulnerable to failing to complete their education, to negative sexual outcomes, to experiences of violence, and to contact with the juvenile justice system, to name but a few of the perils highlighted when young people of color make it onto our radar. The drive to identify their risks and figure out how to minimize or eliminate them often leads to understanding youth as only in crisis or in need of rescue. We generally come to see them as lacking in agency. Yet in localities such as Chicago, they are actively immersed in struggles such as fighting for sexual and reproductive justice, calling out police brutality, and pushing back against the closing of their public schools. So how might we be placing youth “at risk” by not attempting to de-

velop a more thorough comprehension of the inequalities they confront as they negotiate their development and experiences? An intersectional lens facilitates our ability to move beyond seeing youth of color as simply “at risk” by taking some risks ourselves.

The adoption of an intersectional approach in my work on Latina youth and sexuality has been instrumental to how I engage with their problematic framing as “at risk,” allowing me to uncover how some of the interactions of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and generational status work in their lives. Although I initially sought to stay away from talk of their risk in order to avoid participating in their pathologization, I did come to learn more about risks, but in a more meaningful way. For example, we usually think of school-based comprehensive sex education as an effective way to help young people avoid various risks, but the narratives of the young Latinas I interviewed reveal that sex education, when guided by stereotypical assumptions about Latina/o communities, can actually create or exacerbate these risks for them.⁸ I now realize that I cannot entirely escape the theme of risk in my study of young women of color, but I can draw on intersectionality to interrogate the creation of risk and the role it plays in their lives.

We understand now that the interplay of various identities and categories of difference matters for our encounters with oppression and domination. Yet as political scientist Rita Dhamoon asserts, there is still a need to account for how exactly it is that these connections work together through discourses, practices, and systems of domination if we are to deepen our comprehension of the social production and organization of inequality.⁹ The practice of naming inequality and acting to eradicate it through an intersectional approach has been and should continue to be guided by the demand for social justice—intersectionality is a political project, what political scientist Julia S. Jordan-Zachery describes as a liberation framework.¹⁰ While we may debate what we mean by social justice and how to go about attaining it, intersectional practice is critical to our ability to carry out these conversations with one another, in order to refine our analyses of how structural power operates and impacts our lives as well as how to disrupt it.

We need to be willing to take risks and ask different questions. As I have already noted, feminist scholars of color who adopt an intersectional practice may do so at the risk of being dismissed as not academically rigorous enough. Recently, I was taken aback when someone characterized intersectionality as not being a real intellectual endeavor. Barbara Tomlinson describes this as a “rhetoric of reduction” by which some critics of intersectionality “reduce intersectional scholars of color to their embodied identities and denigrate their ability to theorize.”¹¹ There are risks in asking questions informed by intersectional practice. But the risks of not asking alternative questions far outweigh the risks of not putting them out there for others to engage. Furthermore, I think we should be willing to ask ourselves why we want to know the answers to the

questions we ask. On this point, Jordan-Zachery insists that as “we employ intersectionality as an analytical tool, we have to be very specific in articulating for what purposes(s) we are using it.”¹² It is how we can hold ourselves accountable for the work of social justice. And it reminds us that our scholarship was intended to be oppositional and that we should continue to be insurgent in the production of knowledge.

NOTES

1. Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Molly Talcott, “Interconnections and Configurations: Toward a Global Feminist Ethnography,” in *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 135–153; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 193–209.

2. Grace Lee Boggs, *Women and the Movement to Build a New America* (Detroit, MI: National Organization for an American Revolution, 1977); Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed., ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983), 210–218; Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, NY: Persephone, 1981).

3. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014); Chela Sandoval, “US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 1–24.

4. Patricia Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

5. Quoted in Tamara Winfrey Harris, “Revisiting Black Macho: Is America Finally Ready to Embrace Black Feminism—and Black Women?,” *Ms. Magazine* (Summer 2015): 31.

6. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*; Virginia R. Dominguez, “For a Politics of Love and Rescue,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 361–393.

7. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810; Denise Segura, “Navigating between Two Worlds: The Labyrinth of Chicana Intellectual Production in the Academy,” *Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 1 (2003): 28–51.

8. For example, Latina youth encountered sex education lessons that framed Latinas as hyperfertile and “Latino culture” as a main reason why they were “at risk” for pregnancy. This not only limited their sex education to pregnancy prevention, but also perpetuated racialized gender stereotypes about Latina/o communities.

9. Rita Kaur Dhamoon, “Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2011): 230–243.

10. Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, “Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality,” *Politics & Gender* 3, no. 2 (2007): 254–263.

11. Barbara Tomlinson, “To Tell the Truth and Not Get Trapped: Desire, Distance, and Intersectionality at the Scene of Argument,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 1003.

12. Jordan-Zachery, “Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black?,” 261–262.