

The Institutional Life of Intersectionality

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The paper that I am giving today is a part of a larger project, *Black Feminism Remixed*. *Black Feminism Remixed* examines how black feminism is imagined by women's studies in two *simultaneous* and *diametrically opposed* ways: as the future and as the past. I tell this story through the analytic of intersectionality, as it is, I argue, *in and through intersectionality* that women's studies' complicated relationship with black feminism is most apparent. In other words, my project asks how it is possible that intersectionality is imagined *both*, in Kathy Davis' words as a "new *raison d'être* for doing feminist theory and analysis,"¹ *and*, in Jasbir Puar's words as a "tool of diversity management and a mantra of liberal multiculturalism."²

Since intersectionality's emergence³ two decades ago as a juridical intervention that exposes the violence anti-discrimination law inflicts on black female plaintiffs,⁴ intersectionality has become a theory of identity, injury, multiple marginalization, and subjectivity. It has traveled far from law – and often without reference to law – across the humanities and social sciences. Intersectionality is now celebrated as "*the* primary figure of

¹Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword," *Feminist Theory* 9 (2008): 72.

²Jasbir Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 23 (2005): 127.

³I am mindful of work on intersecting structures of domination that pre-dated Crenshaw's now canonical articles. See, for example, Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14 (1988): 42-72; Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *Words of Fire*, ed. Beverly Guy-Shetfall (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995); Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Words of Fire*, ed. Beverly Guy-Shetfall (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1984).

⁴See 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); Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991)

political completion in US identity knowledge domains,”⁵ as “part of the gender studies canon,”⁶ as “the most cutting-edge approach to the politics of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class,”⁷ and as “the most important contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.”⁸ It has been transformed from a form of women-of-color feminist outsider-knowledge⁹ to something comfortably housed within the academy, in spaces like Columbia Law School’s Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies,¹⁰ in myriad academic conferences¹¹ and journals,¹² and in departmental mission statements where Women’s Studies programs define themselves by a commitment to “analyses of gender and sexualities in intersection with other important categories including race, ethnicity, religion, class, disability and nationality.”¹³

The question that I want to think through today though is: Why has intersectionality enjoyed such tremendous intellectual popularity *and* disciplinary mobility? How has a concept that emerged on the pages of law reviews come to be called *the* “most important contribution women's studies has made”? Why has this analytic had the capacity to move

⁵Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 240, italics included in original.

⁶Maxine Baca Zinn, “Patricia Hill Collins: Past and Future Innovations,” *Gender and Society* 26 (2012): 31.

⁷Ange-Marie Hancock, *Solidarity Politics for Millennials: A Guide to Ending the Oppression Olympics* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 3.

⁸Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30.3 (2005): 1771.

⁹I agree with Rachel E. Luft and Jane Ward who write, “intersectionality is often misidentified as the purview of feminism and women’s studies. ... As the latest in a long line of challenges by women of color to feminism and other historically essentializing, binary discourses, intersectionality is both inside and outside of feminism and women’s studies.” Rachel E. Luft and Jane Ward, “Toward an intersectionality just out of reach: confronting challenges to intersectional practice,” in *Perceiving Gender Locally, Globally, and Intersectionally*, eds. Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Texler Segal. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Group, 2009), 12

¹⁰For the announcement on the opening of Columbia Law School’s Center, see http://www.law.columbia.edu/media_inquiries/news_events/2011/october2011/Intersectionality [Accessed December 8, 2012]

¹¹National Women’s Studies Association 2009 conference “Difficult Dialogues” examined “how feminist intellectual, political, and institutional practices cannot be adequately practiced if the politics of gender are conceptualized (overtly or implicitly) as superseding or transcending the politics of race, sexuality, social class, nation, and disability” and The Eastern Sociological Society’s 2011 theme was “Intersectionalities and Complex Inequalities.”

¹²See *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 11.4 (2009); *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13.3 (July 2006); and the forthcoming issue of *Signs* 38.3 (2013) as just a few examples of journal issues devoted to intersectionality.

¹³See Emory University’s Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department’s website.

from law across the humanities and social sciences (it is, I should note, worth lingering in the peculiarity of this mobility; at most US universities, law schools are their own intellectual fortresses. Their promise, however illusory, of a lucrative job that will pay off substantial student debt, their comfortable and often corporate-looking facilities, and their well-resourced and often policed libraries-- at my own institution non-law school students are not welcome in the law school library, and at my alma mater, non-law school students were not permitted in the law library during exam period – all signal university’s investments in the law school as a particularly valuable institution. Disciplinary borders perform similar gate-keeping work, ensuring that law and the humanities- at least at most US universities- remain intellectually and institutionally separate).

Kathy Davis grapples with these questions in her widely-cited “Intersectionality as Buzzword,” an article which promises to reveal “the secret” of intersectionality’s “success”: “vagueness.”¹⁴ Intersectionality is appealing precisely because it can mean so much. It can act as theory, method, and/or politic; it can function as a strategy for describing identity, subjectivity, personhood, marginalization, injury, harm, redress, appeals to the state, and structures of dominance. I want to linger in Davis’ revelation of intersectionality’s “secret,” and suggest that it is a curious term for describing intersectionality’s rise, popularity, and “travels.” Indeed, what makes Davis’ investment in both “secrecy” and “vagueness” surprising is its inattention to questions of power. My own work aspires to ask different questions: How is intersectionality’s “success” related to its capacity to strip itself (or to be stripped) of women of color? How is intersectionality’s “success” related to the university’s investment in ideas of diversity and difference, and intersectionality’s easy conflation with those very ideas? How, following Vrushali Patil’s work, is intersectionality’s success related

¹⁴Davis, 68.

to US academic hegemony such that “applications of intersectionality ... continue to be shaped by the geographies of colonial modernity?”¹⁵ In other words, I never want to think about intersectionality’s “success,” its popularity and mobility apart from questions of power.

In place of “vagueness,” I want to offer two answers to the question “why has this term become so popular? Why did this term move from law reviews across the humanities and social sciences?” First, I want to spend some time focusing on intersectionality’s relationship to *temporality*, its capacity to speak *both* past and future simultaneously. Second, I want to briefly spend some time talking about intersectionality’s relationship to what is often called the “corporate university” or the “neoliberal university.” I will bracket for today debates about those terms, and instead emphasize my own interest in the ways in which intersectionality has been easily institutionalized because of the ways it has been constructed to resonate with institutional logics and rhetorics of diversity.

So, first, temporality: in my work, I treat intersectionality as a feminist orientation *in time*, as an analytic that powerfully describes both what women’s studies *could be* and what women’s studies has *already become*, that speaks about the discipline’s aspirations and progress. Indeed, I argue that part of intersectionality’s analytical power is its capacity to simultaneously narrate the labor that feminism has already completed, and the labor it endeavors to complete. I call this intersectionality’s capacity to speak about *feminism-future* and *feminism-past*, and to speak about both simultaneously. Despite the fact that *feminism-future* and *feminism-past* seem opposed, I argue that these two temporal pulls are underpinned by corresponding racial politics. When intersectionality is imagined as feminism’s future,

¹⁵Vrushali Patil, “From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We’ve Really Come,” *Signs* 38.4 (2013): 850.

intersectionality sheds black women in a post-racial feminism that either presumes that black women need not be the center of intersectional work because intersectionality's virtue is complexity not identity politics *or* that intersectionality is an endlessly expansive analytic which can – and should – describe all subjects' experiences. When intersectionality is relegated to feminism's past, its identitarian commitments are questioned, particularly in a moment in which identitarianism is "vilified by feminists of many different persuasions."¹⁶ In both cases, it is intersectionality's intimate engagement with black female flesh that is treated as suspect.

If, as Rachel Lee notes, "Women's Studies is always 'about to be,'" then intersectionality is central to the field's becoming.¹⁷ Intersectionality has become *the* analytic that marks the field of women's studies, the hallmark of complex feminist scholarship, and feminist scholarship's political and theoretical goal. Even as intersectionality is regularly described as fundamental to feminism's future, it is also imagined as something that feminists have not – and might not ever -- fully achieve. Robyn Wiegman argues that intersectionality will always disappoint, since the "political desires" that animate intersectionality are always greater than the analytic's ability to enact social justice.¹⁸ Vivian May echoes this with the "impossibility thesis" which presumes that "doing intersectional teaching, theorizing, research, or politics if regarded as an ideal, but *not actually achievable*."¹⁹ Both Wiegman and May reveal that intersectionality is both part of feminism's aspirational agenda, and one of feminism's constant shortcomings. We are always failing to *do* what intersectionality promises, and intersectionality is always failing to perform what we hope it

¹⁶Susan Hekman, "Beyond Identity: Feminism, Identity, and Identity Politics," *Feminist Theory* 1 (2000): 289.

¹⁷Rachel Lee, "Notes from the (non)Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color," *Meridians* 1 (2000): 89.

¹⁸Wiegman, 20.

¹⁹Vivian M. May, "Intersectionality," in *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies*, ed. Catherine M. Orr, Ann Braithwaite, and Diane Lichtenstein (New York: Routledge, 2011), 157.

might: “to render a vision of the world adequate to the political desire that engages us in it.”²⁰ It is this “not-yet-ness” of intersectionality – the fact that intersectionality is treated as *both* essential to feminism’s future and as not yet perfected -- that marks intersectionality’s orientation toward the future.²¹

I am particularly interested in detailing the intimate connections between intersectionality’s “not-yet-ness” and the *logic of improvement*. By logic of improvement, I mean *both* the presumption that intersectionality will perfect the field of women’s studies in significant ways, and the idea that intersectionality needs to be improved to achieve its full analytical promise. I am invested *both* in claims like Nancy Hirschmann’s: “we are sometimes better at calling for intersectionality and proclaiming its importance than we are at actually doing it,”²² and in assertions like Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree’s – that intersectionality has a potentially transformative “underutilized potential.”²³ Taken together, these contentions amplify the dual ways that intersectionality’s “not-yet-ness” is regularly linked to an ethic of improvement.

What intersectionality can achieve for feminism, and how it will improve feminism are up for grabs. Intersectionality is, at times, described as a movement from sameness to difference,²⁴ from essentialism to multiplicity, from the general to the particular.²⁵ What is certain is that intersectionality promises feminism a new kind of “complexity.”²⁶ As Leslie

²⁰Wiegman, 89.

²¹Luft and Ward 33.

²²Nancy Hirschmann, “Disability as a New Frontier for Feminist Intersectionality Research,” *Politics & Gender* 8 (2012): 401.

²³Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree, “Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities,” *Sociological Theory* 28.2 (June 2010): 130.

²⁴Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

²⁵See Wiegman.

²⁶I theorize this more in my article “On Difficulty: Intersectionality as Feminist Labor” (Online at http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/nash_01.htm)

McCall notes (in a now-canonical article aptly titled “The Complexity of Intersectionality”), “The terms complex, complexity, and complexities appear frequently and are central in key texts on intersectionality”²⁷ Complexity becomes intersectionality’s virtue, a shorthand for a certain kind of intellectual, theoretical, and political labor, and a way of describing a desired feminist future. In these pleas, intersectionality is celebrated for its promise of new complexity, not for its relationship to black female bodies, or for its capacity to remedy black women’s legal invisibility.

Indeed, it is now commonplace for scholars to suggest ways to complicate intersectionality in the service of complicating feminism’s explanatory power. According to these scholars, at its inception intersectionality attended only to race/gender (and to black women particularly), but a complex intersectionality requires attention both to understudied intersections (class/sexuality, for example) and to multiple intersections (race/sexuality/disability, for example). Calls for an attention to more intersections share the idea that Crenshaw’s original articulation of intersectionality can be reformed in order to yield more complex analyses of structures of domination. In so doing, these pleas imagine an intersectionality with more “analytic bite,”²⁸ and promise an intersectionality that “live[s] up to its potential ... to grasp the complex realities it was initially intended to address.”²⁹

Claims to more intersections are often articulated in reference to Crenshaw’s now-famous traffic metaphor. For Crenshaw, discrimination could be analogized to traffic flowing through a clogged intersection; a collision might be caused by multiple cars flowing through the intersection, and assigning accountability to only one driver might be impossible. Similarly, for black women, discrimination can be race-based, gender-based, or

²⁷McCall, 1772.

²⁸Choo and Ferree, 129.

²⁹Davis, 68.

both, and a legal regime which can not recognize – or remedy – raced *and* gendered harms ignores a significant set of black women’s injuries. It has become a scholarly tradition to extend Crenshaw’s work by adding new configurations of roadwork onto her metaphor, effectively problematizing the “Big Three” approach to intersectional work, an approach which focuses on gender, race, and class.³⁰ Garry notes, “As I have visualized intersectionality over two decades, I have added many more streets to the intersection and placed a roundabout in its center.”³¹ The addition of “many more streets” and a “roundabout” adds a new kind of analytical complexity to intersectionality. Garry’s intervention suggests that transforming Crenshaw’s imagined race-and-gender intersection into an ever-complicated rotary, one with multiple streets converging filled with endless possibility for collisions, usefully nuances intersectionality *and* that intersectionality can be made ever more complicated by using Crenshaw’s intersection as a starting point for more nuanced metaphors.

What I have shown so far is that intersectionality is often imagined as part of feminism’s inevitable future; indeed, feminists regularly argue that if intersectionality is practiced better, if it is adopted by new disciplines, if it is attentive to new intersections, if it is empirically tested, the analytic has the capacity to radically re-make both women’s studies and related disciplines. Intersectionality, then, is a work-in-progress, a “not-yet-ness” which always promises new complexity. Of course, complexity is its own short-hand for feminism’s futurity, a term that can produce political anxiety (questions like “At what point does complexity turn into research-chaos” capture this³²) and that can gesture to the open-

³⁰Kathy Davis, “Intersectionality in Transatlantic Perspective,” In: C. Klinger and G.-A. Knapp, eds. *Überkreuzungen. Fremdheit, Ungleichheit, Differenz*. (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2005), 24.

³¹Garry, 502.

³² Paul Scheibelhofer and Vince Marotta, *Intersectionality : Legacies and Controversies*, Journal of Intercultural Studies

endedness of feminism's future. Ultimately, intersectionality's complexity, no matter how it is imagined, is treated as a kind of remedy; if perfected, intersectionality can effectively cure women's studies of violent histories of exclusion.

As much as intersectionality enables scholars to imagine what women's studies *could* be, intersectionality also marks feminism's past. It is not uncommon, particularly in the midst of a moment marked by a suspicion of identitarian work, to hear intersectionality described as "located within the late seventies or the late eighties."³³ If intersectionality can be located in feminism's historical past – as a set of critiques that emerged decades ago -- it can also be situated in feminism's political past because feminism has recognized the analytic's importance, responded to intersectional interventions, and incorporated intersectional critiques into feminist work. Indeed, scholars now regularly narrate feminist history as a series of transformations produced by women of color feminists: "race, class, and gender were once seen as separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups. Now scholars generally agree that these issues (as well as ethnicity, nation, age and sexuality) – and how they intersect – are integral to individuals' positions in the social world."³⁴ In this account – one which Clare Hemmings terms a "progress" narrative – intersectionality has already arrived, and occupied center-stage in feminist work. In fact, it is intersectionality's dominance within feminist work that has allowed some to consider intersectional work as complete and even passé. As Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines, and

³³ Rod Ferguson "Reading Intersectionality" *Trans-Scripts Online* http://www.humanities.uci.edu/collective/hctr/trans-scripts/2012/2012_02_08.pdf [Accessed March 23, 2013] For more on this, see Clare Hemmings' chapter on Progress Narratives.

³⁴ Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz, *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1.

Mark Casey note, “‘Intersectionality’ has been significantly critiqued within feminist theory and is now even dismissively branded as ‘outmoded’ and ‘outdated.’”³⁵

If intersectionality is part of a moment in feminism’s history, then *feminism-past* is underpinned by a call for moving “beyond” intersectionality. The logic animating the call for “beyond” is dual: a sense that the field has already been radically transformed by the intervention *or* that there is something dangerous about continuing to practice identity-work like intersectionality. Indeed, if identity-work is imagined to be part of feminism’s past, then it is intersectionality’s intimate relationship with black women’s marginality that renders intersectionality out-dated. Lee articulates how this narrative gets amplified: “an almost exhausted sentiment that the challenge made by women of color to Women’s Studies is well work and that as we narrate and proceed into the future of feminism, the only thing for sure is that Women’s Studies ought not be invested in those angry charges made by women of color that they were excluded, because now they are included – even dominant – in Women’s Studies.”³⁶ Lee’s performance of this narrative reveals that the “challenges” women of color feminism amplified are imagined to *already* be “included” in the contemporary labor of women’s studies, offering scholars the freedom to move beyond intersectionality.

Part of the call to move beyond intersectionality is a critique of how intersectionality has come to be practiced as it has transitioned from outsider-knowledge to institutionalized framework. Indeed, some argue that intersectionality has become a kind of simplification, one so preoccupied with particularity- with locating subjects through the production of a

³⁵Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines, and Mark Casey, “Introduction,” *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 3.

³⁶Lee, 95.

seemingly endless list of adjectives- that it relies on precisely the categories it purports to disrupt. Wendy Brown writes:

... subject construction itself does not occur in discrete units as race, class, nation, and so forth. So the model of power developed to apprehend the making of a particular subject/ion will never accurately describe or trace the lines of a living subject. Nor can this paradox be resolved through greater levels of specificity in the models themselves e.g., mapping the precise formation of the contemporary middle class Tejana lesbian. This subject, too, is a fiction ...³⁷

For Brown, intersectionality gestures towards particularity by offering an ever-extending list of categories – race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, disability – but never actually grapples with the “fictiveness” of the categories it deploys, nor attends to the fact that subjectivity is not experienced in “discrete units” of gender, race, class, and sexuality.³⁸ Here, Brown references the figure of the “contemporary ‘middle class Tejana lesbian’” as an example of intersectionality’s investment in particularity. The addition of “contemporary” and “middle class” to “Tejana lesbian” both point to a more specific imagined subject and re-invest intersectionality in categories it should undermine. Nira Yuval –Davis echoes these concerns, arguing that intersectionality reifies “...fragmentation and multiplication of the wider categorical identities rather than more dynamic, shifting and multiple constructions of intersectionality.”³⁹ The problem of intersectionality, then, is that its attention to particularity never challenges the structures of domination that incessantly reduce subjects to fictive categories.

If intersectionality hinges on a problematic impulse toward particularity, some argue that it also relies on fictive fixity, treating race, gender, class, and myriad other categories as

³⁷Wendy Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” *Differences* 9 (1997): 93-4.

³⁸ Juana Rodriguez writes, “identity is more than a list of categories that name our sexuality, gender, HIV status, nation, age, ethnicity, ability, class, language, citizenship status, and religion. ... What aspects of identity exceed the categories we have created to define our places in the world?” Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 21-2.

³⁹Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13 (2006): 194

separable rather than intimately enmeshed. Jasbir Puar asserts that intersectionality “presumes that components – race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion – are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity... .”⁴⁰ Rather than treating categories as Crenshaw proposed, as intimately enmeshed and unknowable apart from each other, intersectionality as practiced has treated race, gender, class, and sexuality as separate and distinct “components” that simply coincide to mark subjects’ experiences.

Both Brown and Puar’s respective critiques of intersectionality’s failures – its incessant particularity and its incessant fixity – are underpinned by an implicit starting point: that intersectionality has come to be dominant within feminist studies, that it is practiced and circulated in a way that differs from how it was “originally” articulated, and that it has come to be “consolidat[ed] ... as a dominant heuristic.”⁴¹ My interest in these two critiques is that they are underpinned by the belief that intersectionality has arrived, that it has fundamentally transformed the nature of feminist work so much so that, as Puar notes, “an interest in exploring other frames, for example assemblage, gets rendered as problematic and even produces WOC [women of color] feminists invested in other genealogies as “race-traitors.”⁴² Taken together, these two criticisms shared starting point is that intersectionality has become the prevailing way of speaking about so-called difference within women’s studies, so much so that speaking about personhood and power outside of intersectionality can be an act of “traitorousness.”

⁴⁰Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 212.

⁴¹Puar online.

⁴²Puar, Online.

If intersectionality has arrived, and has been incorporated into feminist thought, a host of scholars have suggested moving “beyond” it, offering other analytics that circumvent intersectionality’s essentialisms and elisions. It is important to note that many of the calls for “beyond” are implicitly critiques of how intersectionality is practiced *now*, criticisms of “the changed geopolitics of reception as well as a tendency towards reification in the deployment of intersectionality,”⁴³ and not necessarily critiques of the intersectional commitments Crenshaw advocated in her two now-canonical essays. Calls to move “beyond” intersectionality, then, are pleas to transcend intersectionality’s current practice rather than critiques of intersectionality as a juridical remedy.

For some scholars, moving “beyond” intersectionality constitutes an attempt to think more rigorously about the constitution of the structures of domination that intersectionality merely traces. Maria Gonzalez notes:

Intersectionality in itself ... cannot explain either the sources of inequalities or their reproduction over time; intersectionality must be placed in the ‘institutional bases of power shaping race, class and gender.’ What are these institutional bases of power? How do we identify them? How do we link intersectionality to its macro level conditions of possibility, those “interlocking” structures of oppression? It is here that the RGC [race, gender, class] perspective runs into a theoretical dead end which the abundance of metaphors (e.g., interlocking, intersecting, etc.) can neither hide nor overcome.⁴⁴

For Gonzalez, intersectionality’s shortcoming is that it is descriptive, locating subjects within structures of domination rather than theorizing power, providing scholars with tools for locating power’s workings, but not for determining its modes of domination and reproduction. It is intersectionality’s tendency to describe rather than deconstruct that leads her to call for a move “beyond” it, and for an embrace of a Marxist analytical frame, one

⁴³Puar, Online.

⁴⁴Maria Gonzalez, “Marxism and Class, Gender and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy,” *Race, Gender, and Class* 8 (2001).

which recognizes that “class is qualitatively different from gender and race and cannot be considered just another system of oppression.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Carastathis advocates a move “beyond” intersectionality toward a “solidarity” politics that “... (1) performs a structural analysis of the ways in which systems of oppression ‘interlock’ and of the ways in which subjects are located in and reproduce these systems. It (2) involves an actual commitment to transforming the structural relations that subtend these systems.”⁴⁶ Like Gonzalez, Carastathis critiques intersectionality’s failure to theorize the contours and constitutions of structures of domination, and instead advocates a new kind of feminist politics, one which does not abandon identity altogether, but instead “distinguishes between being *positioned* or *situated* in relations of oppression and privilege – an ineluctable fact of life under prevailing conditions – and *positioning* or *situating* oneself in relations of solidarity with ‘communities of struggle.’”⁴⁷ For Carastathis, what intersectionality illuminates (that we are “positioned or situated”) does little to engender activism whereas solidarity offers radical openings for unexpected connections among “communities of struggle.” In both cases, the call for beyond – whether in the form of Marxist theory or a feminist solidarity politics – is a way of re-animating feminist politics, and rigorously engaging with how structures of domination are produced and reproduced.

Perhaps the most-cited call for moving “beyond” intersectionality is Puar’s advocacy of assemblage. While Puar concedes that assemblage need not wholly replace intersectionality, that “intersectional identities and assemblages must remain as interlocutors in tension,”⁴⁸ she also celebrates assemblage’s ability to center dynamism, contingency,

⁴⁵Gonzalez.

⁴⁶Carastathis, 30.

⁴⁷Carastathis, 30.

⁴⁸Puar, Online.

affect, sensation, and movement, rather than “locality, specificity, placement, junctions.”⁴⁹

She writes:

There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather, queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melding, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations – identity politics – by control theorists.⁵⁰

While intersectionality locates subjects, describes their social positions, and asks how race and gender operate in conjunction to mark that position, assemblage privileges motion, contingency, and dynamism, asking about forms of “belonging,” relationalities, and intensities that are not—and cannot be—captured by identity politics. If the “move from intersectionality to assemblage,” the move *beyond* intersectionality, jettisons intersectionality’s relentless fixity by centering movement, it also undoes intersectionality’s problematic relationship with black women. As Puar notes, “the method of intersectionality is most predominantly used to qualify the specific ‘difference’ of ‘women of color,’ a category that has now become, I would argue, simultaneously emptied of specific meaning on the one hand and overdetermined in its deployment on the other. In this usage, intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman Of Color (WOC), who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance.”⁵¹ Indeed, Puar critiques how intersectionality renders the category “women of color” both empty and overflowing with meaning, and she problematizes the ways that black women’s bodies become metaphors of difference, of resistance, of marginality. In critically assessing intersectionality’s symbolic attachment to black women’s flesh, Puar’s assemblage moves

⁴⁹Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 212.

⁵⁰Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 211.

⁵¹Puar, Online.

beyond the privileged analytical place of black women toward a new kind of theoretical framework that de-centers identity

When intersectionality is located in *feminism-past*, intersectionality is treated as something that has already arrived, and feminism is imagined to have *already* institutionalized intersectionality so that we can now think about dominant ways that intersectionality is practiced. It is the variety of ways that intersectionality is now performed – which is often imagined as different than how it was originally conceptualized – that has led scholars to advocate moving *beyond* intersectionality towards new analytics that capture the complexity of personhood and structures of domination in new ways. Of course, the call to move beyond intersectionality is also often a call to move beyond the centrality of black women's bodies to feminist work, a call that emerges from a moment critical of identity-work and its fictions and elisions. Whether it is a critique of the metaphorical work black women's bodies are called upon to perform or a criticism of a theory constructed around the multiply-marginalized, intersectionality's form in *feminism-past* is one that treats a preoccupation with the social location of black women as problematically outdated.

Crucially, in both *feminism-future* and *feminism-past*, intersectionality's imagined peril comes from its attachment to black women's bodies, and its promise comes from its willingness to transcend the (imagined) social location of black women. In *feminism-future*, intersectionality's possibilities come from moving beyond black women and dramatically expanding the analytic to capture ever-more complexity (indeed, black women are often seen as outside of complexity), and in *feminism-past*, intersectionality's identitarian dangers and essentialist shortcomings come from its attachment to black women. In both cases, it is intersectionality's intimacy with black women that is imagined to devalue the analytic.

My work on the temporal logics of intersectionality reveal that in contemporary feminist practice, black female bodies (and perhaps black feminism) are treated outside of our unfolding present moment, as *always already anachronisms*. Indeed, exploring intersectionality's temporal labor shows that the time of our unfolding present has been constructed with an insistent belief that black female bodies are either historical subjects whose critiques have already been heard or harbingers of a future where intersectionality belongs to all. While intersectionality was designed to remedy black women's doctrinal invisibility, it has produced myriad other invisibilities including one that has heretofore been under-theorized: a temporal one.

If intersectionality is a way of speaking about time divorced from bodies – particularly black women's bodies and the affects that swirl around them – it is also a way of putting women's studies into conversation with the corporate university. My project emphasizes that the relationship between women's studies and black feminism unfolds against the backdrop of the conditions that mark the contemporary academy. When I speak about these conditions, I refer to *this* moment in the longer history of the so-called “corporate university” -- one marked by conditions we know all-too well: the requirement that faculty fund our own research; the proliferation of precarious adjunct labor; the growth of student debt; the scarcity of tenure-track jobs; and the like. These are also moments marked by women's studies on-going precarious institutional location, one that produces a complicated relationship between the discipline and the university. Women's studies scholars increasingly critique the “imperial university” (to borrow the title of a recently published anthology) while actively courting institutional legitimacy by attempting to secure tenure lines and by engaging in program-building (including initiating graduate certificate programs and/or PhD programs, and seeking departmental status). In other words, there

are *pleasures* in institutionalization for women's studies programs *and* for women's studies faculty, pleasures which include visibility and legitimacy, even as those pleasures often hinge on rendering someone (or someone's labor) precarious, and even as institutionalization means continuing to subject our scholarship and pedagogy to the rubrics, assessment measures, and corporate logics that increasingly dominate in the university. These are the paradoxes that mark the present.

One of the ways, I argue, that women's studies has secured its institutional legitimacy in this moment is by insisting on the importance of its premier analytic, method, and theory: intersectionality. In other words, intersectionality is what *we* do differently, and it is what *we* do well. One sign of our "success" is the way that intersectionality has traversed disciplinary boundaries becoming a keyword that animates scholarship and pedagogy across the humanities and social sciences. Intersectionality is interdisciplinary – to put two "buzzwords" (to borrow Kathy Davis' term) together – and its interdisciplinary confers value on our discipline. Intersectionality is also a "buzzword" that easily resonates with colleges and universities' purported interest in diversity, inclusion, and difference (even as many intersectionality scholars critique the "benign variation" logic of diversity embraced by so many universities). In other words, if intersectionality is simultaneously the past and future of women's studies, it is very much part of the present at many colleges and universities where, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, "the language of intersectionality is now associated with diversity," and Rachel Luft and Jane Ward emphasize, "the distinction between intersectionality and diversity remains blurry." Intersectionality is, then, a crucial way that women's studies names its institutional value in a moment where being *valuable* is crucial for staking a claim to one's location in the university.

Of course, intersectionality is *not* diversity, and is largely opposed to the administrative and bureaucratic deployments of diversity language which are rarely animated by anti-subordination ethics. But intersectionality reveals precisely the puzzling position that animates much of contemporary feminism; on the one hand, to have one's tools deployed by those who allocate resources feels like power (it might also feel something like pleasure). On the other hand, once those tools are deployed by those who allocate resources, they are all too often stripped of whatever radicalism they had, and tamed and domesticated. In an era of intersectionality's ubiquity, it is the labor of feminism to attend to the variety of ways power is always bound up in intersectionality's circulations.