Intersections of race and gender

Umut Erel

Introduction

The question of how race and gender oppressions intersect, its effects on individuals and society, and how to challenge, resist and build alternative social and political communities has been a focus of research and activism for a long time. Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectional approaches to understanding race and gender oppression can be seen as a ‘method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool’ (Carbado et al. 2015:303). Intersectional approaches are concerned with analysing, dismantling and challenging institutionalised, structural and interpersonal power relations and oppressions of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, abilities and others. As this list shows, intersectional approaches go beyond analysing and challenging race and gender oppressions, though race and gender will be the main focus of this chapter. This chapter begins by looking at origins and development of intersectional thought, in particular the emergence of intersectional activist knowledges in the 1970s and 1980s in the US and the UK, and how these were intertwined with academic articulations. It then introduces the different levels of analysis to which intersectional thought has been brought, in particular social ontologies, discursive practice and concrete social relations (Anthias 2012), the matrix of domination, pertaining to structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains (Collins 2009) and the differentiation between structural, political and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). The chapter then outlines the principal contributions of intersectional thought as a project to render visible experiences and positions of those affected by multiple oppressions. It also entails understanding the complexity of experiential and structural aspects of multiple oppressions, which should be theorised and understood as irreducible to each other. A key contribution of intersectional thought has been in the arena of epistemology, both as critique of the power structures reproduced in existing knowledge practices and projects of developing new forms and ways of knowing. The chapter then turns to critiques and debates of intersectional thought, in particular about imprecise epistemologies, the marginalisation of issues of sexuality, and the decentring of race, colonial and whitening practices. The final section provides an outlook about the continuing relevance of intersectional thought, in particular in terms of further theoretical and methodological developments through dialogues with decolonial and indigenous approaches, as well as through the cross-over into everyday discourse.

Origins and development of intersectional thought

Intersectional approaches aim at empowering Black women and women of colour, to better understand their experiences of expression, validate their experiences and define themselves.
In this sense, intersectional approaches have also challenged the marginalisation of Black women and women of colour in theoretical debates and social justice movements concerned with single axis analysis and resistance. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced and elaborated the term intersectionality, giving impetus to much future intersectional research. Her critical legal scholarship demonstrates that Black women’s experiences of discrimination of gender and race have routinely been rendered incomprehensible in the US legal system that narrowly conceptualised gender discrimination through the experiences of white women, while conceptualising race discrimination through the experiences of Black men. This often meant that Black women were unable to succeed with legal challenges to discrimination. By taking an intersectional approach, Crenshaw challenged the US legal system to take full account of Black women’s experiences of discrimination and the structures that created these. While acknowledging that at times these may be similar to white women’s experiences of gender discrimination or Black men’s experiences of race discrimination, she showed that in other instances, however, Black women experience a unique set of gendered and racialised discrimination. She also challenged feminist and antiracist movements as these can at times produce and legitimise Black women’s marginalisation, when they are seen as not fitting in with either white women’s articulation of feminism or Black men’s articulation of antiracist struggles.

While Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, Hancock’s (2016) intellectual history of intersectionality notes that both Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (2009, originally published in 1990) developed theories of the intersecting oppressions of race and gender at about the same time. Yet, the concern with understanding and fighting sexism and racism as mutually constitutive systems of oppression is longstanding and has emerged with urgency among political movements and activists. One of the best-known examples of this is Sojourner Truth’s oft-cited question ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ in a speech at the Women’s Rights Conference in Ohio in 1851, demanding her rights and recognition as both a woman and Black. Yet, she was not alone as Hancock (2015:30) shows, in the 19th century US Black women like Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper and Harriet Jacobs challenged both race and gender oppression. While these early contributions laid the groundwork for later generations of activists and theorists, Hancock suggests taking account of their historical context to view these early voices articulating ‘intersectionality-like’ arguments. Contemporary understandings of intersectionality were forged in activist communities of women of colour in the US, the UK and the Global South in the 1970s and 80s. The Combahee River Collective noted in their path-breaking text ‘A Black Feminist Statement’ (1977) that they

often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual.

(Collective orig. 1977, 1982:14)

The Combahee River Collective articulated this through the notion of ‘interlocking systems of oppression’. Other antecedents of the concept of intersectionality included the notions of ‘double jeopardy’ (Beal 2008, original publication 1970) or ‘multiple jeopardy’ (King 1988). While the early notion of ‘triple oppression’ (James 1986) addressed multiple oppressions of race, gender and class, this additive frame did not sufficiently explore the co-constitution of multiple power relations running the risk of instating hierarchies of oppression. Notions of multiple oppression were further explored by Black feminist theorists and feminists of colour interrogating the marginalisation of race and Black women’s experiences in the women’s movement (Davis 1982; Lorde 1984) and the
gendered and racialised social divisions from a global feminist point of view (Mohanty 1988). In the UK, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) highlighted the connections between race, ethnicity and gender, while Lewis (1996) looked at the co-constitution of race and gender in social policy. Brah (1996) explored the concept of diaspora space from a gendered, racialised perspective with particular reference to South Asian diasporas. These theoretical works were closely engaged with and often part of social justice movements. The ground-breaking collection *The Empire Strikes Back*, exploring race and racism in Britain from an emergent Cultural Studies perspective, included two important and influential contributions on racism and sexism, Hazel Carby’s (1982) ‘White Woman Listen!’ which challenged the idea that Black and white women were affected and oppressed in a uniform manner by social institutions, such as the family, and Pratibha Parmar’s (1982) contribution exploring the experiences and struggles of Asian women as migrants, workers and in reproduction. The 1984 Feminist Review Special Issue ‘Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives’ (Amos et al. 1984) features the London based group Southall Black Sisters who challenged sexism within UK Black and antiracist communities to address domestic violence as well as the silencing of dissenting voices. Also in London, the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent, OWAAD, working around the same time, was crucial in developing the British notion of political Blackness, that advocated a cross-ethnic notion of Blackness as a politically resistant, antiracist subject position encompassing African, African-Caribbean and Asian women’s alliance building. This combination of scholarly and political concerns has been documented in the collections on Black British feminism (Gunaratnam 2014; Mirza 1997). Debates, theories and understandings of the intersections of race and gender have emerged not simply out of scholarly concerns but in conjunction with activist social justice projects. While varying in different parts of the world, the experiences, activism and theorising of women of colour and those experiencing racist and sexist oppressions have been key in articulating intersectional knowledge and social justice projects. Often, as in the case of the Combahee River Collective, these debates also included a concern with sexuality as an important social division, reflecting on how their authors’ identifications and experiences as lesbian women were key to the articulation of political agendas, as well as understanding the co-constitution of power relations and articulations of resistance and empowerment. Yet, the significance of sexuality as a key social division that contributes to intersectional analysis and politics has been recognised more slowly, and has been contested in social movements (Collins 2009; Erel et al. 2010; Hancock 2016).

**Different analytical levels**

Intersectionality refers to power relations of racism and sexism. Intersectionality’s important contribution is to emphasise that race and gender, as well as racism and sexism, are co-constituted, that is they are inseparable in the social world, both in terms of structure and experience. Yet, it is possible and at times helpful to differentiate various analytical levels. Thus Anthias (2012) argues that intersectionality relates firstly to the constitution of social ontologies as categories of sorting people. While this is a feature of social organisation in general, the constitution of categories of race, class and gender is historically specific and in itself imbued with practices and effects of power. She differentiates between ethnic and racial ontological spaces of constructing collectivities, gender as constructing ontologies of biological reproduction and class as relating to the production of economic life (2012:7). At a second level of abstraction, social categories become categories of discursive practice. While race, gender and class are irreducible to each other, they have certain commonalities as they are concerned with making boundaries and hierarchies. The specific categories to which people are sorted are socially constructed and can change over time and space, yet the issue of categorisation itself
remains. The third level of abstraction concerns concrete social relations involving group making processes, where individuals and collectivities negotiate, contest and appropriate the categories with which they are confronted in social life by organisations, institutions and on the interpersonal level. These group making processes are played out in a ‘spatial and temporal context and in relation to the operations of power’ (2012:9).

Collins also looks at different aspects and levels of intersectionality, arguing that intersectional paradigms are useful to understand the experiences of oppression of different social groups, such as US Black women. They can however also explain how ‘Puerticans, US White men, Asian American gays and lesbians, U.S. White women and other historically identifiable groups all have distinct histories that reflect their unique placement in intersecting oppressions’ (Collins 2009:245). She further argues that intersectionality goes beyond recognising and validating experiences of oppression. She puts forward the concept of a ‘matrix of domination’ to describe the ‘overall social organisation within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop and are contained’ (2009:246). Intersecting systems of oppression are organised in four analytically distinct, though empirically interrelated domains of domination. This refers to (1) the structural domain, including the law and institutions, which organise oppression, (2) the disciplinary domain, consisting of bureaucracy and administration, which manages it, (3) the hegemonic domain, which justifies oppressions through ideology, culture and consciousness, and (4) the interpersonal level that affects everyday life and experience (Collins 2009:295–309).

Crenshaw (1991) differentiates between ‘structural intersectionality’ and ‘political intersectionality’. The former level of analysis refers to the intersection of ‘race, gender, and class domination’ and the policy responses this requires. For example, in the arena of domestic violence policy, ‘intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who face different obstacles because of race and class’ (1991:1246). The level of political intersectionality highlights ‘that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas’ (1991:1252). She also refers to ‘representational intersectionality’ which address the ways in which images of women of colour draw on sexist and racist narratives tropes (Crenshaw 1991). Crenshaw explores in ‘particular, how the production of images of women of color and the contestations over those images tend to ignore the intersectional interests of women of color’ (1991). Crenshaw looks in particular at legal and social controversies on the alleged ‘obscenity’ of rap music. She shows how contestations around sexism and racism of the court case against 2 Live Crew did not engage with the experiences or interests of Black women. She points out how these debates instead formulated antiracist or feminist positions equating anti-racism with Black and feminism with white women’s interests. The significance of cultural images of Black women has also been elaborated by Collins (2009), who argues that four key stereotypes of (1) the mule, an uncomplaining hard worker, (2) the jezebel, as highly sexualised, (3) the mammy, the Black woman as loyal domestic worker and (4) the Black lady, who has given up family life in exchange for a career, provide social scripts for Black women to internalise. Against this cultural domination, Black women’s self-definition, then, is an important aspect of resistance.

**Principal contributions in the study of intersections of race and gender**

Intersectional approaches to race and gender have been widely taken up in a range of disciplines and interdisciplinary work, indeed there is a burgeoning of work using and developing and debating intersectional approaches. Work on intersectionality can be broadly
distinguished as firstly ‘applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics’, secondly ‘discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm’ and thirdly, political interventions employing an intersectional lens (Cho et al. 2013).

**Visibility project**

Intersectional approaches validate the experiences of those subjected to gender and race oppressions. This ‘visibility project’ has been key to rendering ‘previously invisible, unaddressed material effects of black women’s/women of color’s sociopolitical location visible and remediable’ (Hancock 2016:623). Much of this work, in particular in the US context, has explored experiences of Black women and women of colour empirically, opening up and developing new fields of study that uncover the historical and contemporary contributions, lifeworlds and political interventions of groups subjected to oppressions on the basis of race, gender, class, sexuality, immigration status, ability and other social divisions (Romero 2017). These studies are important in allowing a fuller and more complete understanding of the social world in itself, and are particularly instructive on the processes by which power relations are constructed, maintained and challenged. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that such intersectional studies have not simply descriptively included a wider range of subjects and topics into academic study. By exploring and putting centrally the experiences of intersectionally oppressed groups, intersectional research has further been key in shifting wider theoretical frameworks, concepts and boundaries defining these disciplinary debates. For example, Reynolds (2005) work on Black mothers in the UK challenges neat distinctions between concepts of private and public, local and transnational, topics of work, family and community activism while Phoenix and Bauer (2012) make visible the intertwining of class, race, gender and immigration experience as structuring factors in the psycho-social identities and relationships of Caribbean families in Britain. Clarke’s (2011) work on how US Black university educated women make decisions about their romantic relationships and family planning shows that in-depth intersectional empirical work is generative of wide-reaching theoretical insights, developing a framework of gendered, racialised and classed stratification in romantic and family relationships. Accounting for the simultaneity of social divisions of race, gender, class, and others thus produces empirical insights and generates new concepts and theories.

**Capturing complexity**

This gives way to another advantage of intersectional approaches, that is the way it captures experiential and structural complexity. Leslie McCall (2005) differentiates three forms of understanding complexity in intersectional research: Firstly, the intercategorical approach ‘focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories’ (2005:1786). The intracategorical approach examines complexity within a social group, for example differences among women. Thirdly, the anticategorical approach deconstructs the analytical categories itself, challenging ideas of fixed categories. This complexity entails two further aspects, namely the recognition that social identity categories are changeable and specific to time and place (Yuval-Davis 2015). At the same time, one of intersectionality’s key contributions is the recognition that aspects of privilege and marginalisation are not mutually exclusive but features of all social positionings (Collins 2009). Finally, intersectionality’s commitment to social justice projects means that this recognition
of the complex ways in which social positions and power relations are constructed is not only a scholarly exercise, but intersectionality has a commitment to changing ‘the conditions of society such that categories of identity are not permanently linked to sustained inequality in efforts to build a more just world’ (Smooth 2013:21). This relates to another important contribution of intersectional analysis, namely, the ways in which it brings together knowledge produced in both activist and academic contexts. As a knowledge project committed to social justice, intersectionality fosters transformative knowledge both within and outside of academia.

**Irreducibility**

Intersectional approaches view each category, such as race, gender, sexuality, class as irreducible to each other, while also avoiding additive views that see multiple inequalities as simply the sum of its components (Carastathis 2014; Smooth 2013). This issue of irreducibility has generated debate on the methodological approaches to operationalise different categories. Thus, in some quantitative studies, it may be necessary to clearly differentiate factors of race, class, gender in data elicitation, which raises the question whether such a methodological approach is any different from additive approaches. To address this concern it has been suggested that, rather than viewing irreducibility as a methodological feature, it may be best viewed as ‘a heuristic to interpret results of quantitative or qualitative research. On this interpretation, irreducibility is a theoretical commitment on the part of the researcher, which informs her analysis of data that may well have been generated using monistic categories’ (Carastathis 2014:311).

Smooth (2013) draws attention to the analytic benefit of intersectional approaches in enabling researchers to address both structural and individual aspects of inequality and oppression as evolving in response to resistance strategies. These resistance strategies in turn are understood in the context of institutional processes and historical events ‘that can facilitate as well as curtail opportunities for changing categorizations and dismantling dominant frameworks’ (2013:26).

Because of its commitment to complexity and the irreducibility of social divisions to each other, Yuval-Davis characterises intersectionality analysis as ‘the most valid approach to the sociological study of social stratification because it does not reduce the complexity of power constructions into a single social division, including class, as has been customarily the case in stratification theories’ (2015:93–4).

Yuval-Davis’ concept of situated intersectionality underlines that it is applicable to all social groups, beyond the context of Black and women of colour in which it was historically developed. As such, it should be applied to understand the implication of all social groups in multiple power relations. Contributions to a recent edited volume (Jackson 2015) explore how privilege is constructed through the co-constitution of dominant class status and white masculinities (Leek and Kimmel 2015), the articulation of privilege in alternative ‘herbivore’ masculinities in a Japanese subculture (Charlebois 2015), or the ways in which rural urban
Kurdish women migrants reconstitute their social relationships in Turkish cities (Bahar 2015). While not all engage with the concept of intersectionality, there is a wide range of work contributing to furthering knowledge of the imbrications of race, gender, class, sexuality in various contexts, such as the effects of austerity policies and minority women’s resistance in Europe (Bassel and Emejulu 2017), the gendered racialisation of immigrants in the US and Europe (Korteweg, this volume), racialised and gendered effects of design (Onafuwa 2018), or the politics of queer people of colour in urban space (Bacchetta et al. 2015, 2015).

Epistemology

Intersectional debates make a key contribution to wider social sciences on epistemology. Intersectional approaches build on a range of related epistemologies, including standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Hartsock 1983) and Black Feminist thought (Collins 2009), though iterations of intersectional approaches may have distinct emphases and ways of applying and using these. All of these approaches critique the claim to neutrality of dominant, supposedly objective epistemologies, arguing that ‘racism and sexism infiltrate ostensibly neutral knowledge practices’ (May 2007, quoted in Hancock 2016:81). Hancock argues that intersectional epistemology makes distinct contributions in particular the awareness of multiple systems of oppression challenges a conception of a singular binary of centre and margin. This conceptually shifts understandings of social relations, conceptualising ‘reality in a way that takes the politics of subaltern communities as seriously as the politics of mainstream society means that one can no longer self-locate as either on a margin or in a center’ (2016:82). Hancock critiques Hartsock’s (1983) account of feminist standpoint epistemology for privileging gender as the primary social division, arguing that this tendency has been replicated in some intersectional approaches whose focus is on ‘how to theorize intersections between gender/sex and other power differentials based on class, race, ethnicity, sexual politics, geopolitical positioning, age, disability and so on’ (Lykke 2010, quoted in Hancock 2016:84). In contrast to this, feminists of colour, such as Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective, have developed an epistemology that views the relationship between oppressor and oppressed as multivalent and contingent.

A key aspect of intersectional epistemologies draws on Collins’ notion of Black Feminist Knowledge (2009), and emphasises that all knowledge projects are not neutral, but sites of political struggle. Because of the societal devaluation of their subject positions and knowledges, Black women had to find alternative ways of self-validating and defining themselves through alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge. While this subjugated standpoint can centrally contribute to an incisive analysis of power relations, others have warned not to take for granted the view that subordinated groups have access to ‘greater critical conceptual space’ (Narayan quoted in Hancock 2016:92). Yuval-Davis’s (2006) concept of the politics of belonging suggests that it is important to differentiate between social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values, which do not neatly map onto each other.

Intersectionality also intervenes in ontological debates by challenging the idea that social categories and power relations of race and gender can be severed from each other, argues Hancock (2016:105–6). Yet, Yuval-Davis suggests that despite being inseparable in concrete situations, there are indeed different ontological groundings to each social division with ‘(f)or example, class relations are constructed around notions of production and consumption; gender – those of sexuality and reproduction; race/ethnicity as constructed by particular phenotypical or cultural boundaries; ability around the notion of “the normal” etc’ (2015: 94).
An important ontological contribution of intersectional approaches is that it ‘deexceptionalizes the processes and structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, imperialism, nativism, ableism, and a host of other stratifications’ (Hancock 2016:107) instead viewing these power relations as constitutive of social reality.

**Critiques and debates**

While some critiques have come from those who do not see themselves as scholars of intersectionality, a lot of debate and contestation has taken place among authors whose work applies and theorises intersectional approaches. While the concept of intersectionality has been extremely successful in travelling across geographical contexts and disciplines, there have been concerns that this process has gone hand in hand with a loss of meaning, rendering it merely a ‘buzzword’ (Davis 2008) or a ‘meme’ (Hancock 2015), emptying it of critical and transformative potential.

**Epistemological imprecision**

The proliferation of work referencing intersectionality, has at times meant that authors use the term without addressing its full analytic potential, often simply enumerating in a ‘list’ the range of multiple power relations (Erel et al. 2010). This has given rise to the critique that intersectional approaches are epistemologically imprecise: ‘Intersectionality tells us … that the condition and subjectivity of and hence the legal treatment of Black women is not simply the sum of Blackness and femaleness, but it does not shed much light on what it is nevertheless’ (Kwan 2000:687).

A response to Kwan’s critique may be that there is not a single epistemological framework within intersectional approaches. Rather, a number of connected, though distinct knowledge projects work with different epistemological assumptions and ontological frameworks. While his description is fair in regard to some intersectional authors, it does not do justice to the important body of work on epistemology within the intersectional field of scholarship (see above).

**Marginalising sexualities**

There are contestations between proponents of intersectional scholarship who would ‘mainstream’ the approach and those committed to a ‘critical intersectionality’ engaging with concerns of marginalised and oppressed people (Carastathis 2014:306).

One element of this has been criticised as marginalising those affected by multiple oppressions, instead fostering alliances between privileged members of different groups. For example, at times the empirical and analytic centrality of issues of sexuality and gender identification have been neglected, resulting in marginalising trans people’s experiences, views and contributions to theory and activism. Related to this, though distinct, has been the argument that projects professing to engage in intersectional engagements of different groups tend to use the experiences and political agendas of the most privileged members of each group as a basis for alliance building, theorising and knowledge projects ‘For example, white lesbians are invited to share discursive power with racialised men, or white gay men with heterosexual migrant women … this frequently goes at the expense of racialised gays, lesbians and bisexuals’ (Erel et al. 2010:276).
Decentring race, colonising and whitening

An important debate relates to the place of Black women as subjects of study, originators of knowledge and theory. While some critique the idea that intersectionality is closely bound up with researching and understanding the subject position of Black women as limiting its analytic purview (Wiegman 2012) and the ways in which women of colour’s experiences are addressed (Puar 2012); for others, ‘intersectionality research must be properly understood as the purview of scholars investigating women of color’ (Alexander-Floyd: 19), suggesting that scholars researching other groups should develop a distinct conceptual and theoretical vocabulary.

These debates are however not limited to the question of subject of study, but engage more broadly with the centrality of race to intersectional approaches. In particular within feminist debates on intersectionality, there is contestation around the significance of race and racism. While for some authors, intersectionality should normatively involve a commitment to social justice, centrally including recognition of racism, commitments to race equality and anti-racism, for other feminist scholars intersectionality offers a way of describing and analysing social differences, where race is but one difference among others. In some instances, scholars would argue that race should be displaced as a meaningful category of analysis. This relates to critics who have charged intersectional approaches with reifying race-based identity politics in potentially essentialist ways (e.g. Prins 2006; Staunæs 2003). Related to this is the question whether critical race theory as articulating within intersectional approaches can be applied to contexts outside the US, particularly in continental Europe where debates on race are often considered taboo (Lutz et al. 2011). This is in part due to national legislation criminalising data collection on the basis of ‘race’, such as in France (Mugge et al. 2018); in part, however, it is due to marked contrasts in scholars’ political outlook.

Rebuffing these arguments, other authors critique (European) feminist intersectionality discourse for (neo) colonising and whitening the concept. Barbara Tomlinson (2013) focuses her analysis on European feminist critiques of intersectionality which partake in ‘racial Europeanization’ (Goldberg 2006), that is the denial of the continuing existence and centrality of race and racism to the make up of Europe, resulting in the suppression of debate and reflection on race and racism, as well as tools to fight racism. She rebuts some European feminist critiques of US conceptions of intersectionality as overly identitarian, overemphasising and essentialising race, showing how key arguments of Black feminist US scholars are misrepresented through the strategies of ‘depersonalizing’, ‘collectivizing’ and ‘fixing’ the nature of the Black feminists who introduced the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical tool (2013:254). Tomlinson shows how diverse theoretical, epistemological and political engagements of Black intersectional theorists are mis-recognised, as the Black feminist theorists are treated as a homogenous group, and the nuance of their arguments is ignored. These strategies, she suggests, are akin to what Albert Memmi identified as colonial racism. She argues that this is an expression of unacknowledged white racial privilege and calls on feminists to ‘transform the terms of reading and writing to take responsibility for the ways feminist discourses function as technologies of power’ (Tomlinson 2013: 254). Alexander-Floyd argues that two key strategies are part of this attempted colonisation of intersectionality debates: ‘universalizing’ and ‘bait and switch’. The universalising tendency refers to activists’ claims that an issue goes beyond the experience of women of colour, ‘the effect of which is to typically highlight the plight of white women and not that of black women’ (2012:8), while in the ‘bait and switch’ rhetorical strategy, ‘black women are focused on, but only to make visible white female suffering’ (Alexander-Floyd 2012:9). Both strategies result in disappearing the experiences, subjectivities, and intellectual legacies of Black women. In a related vein, Bilge (2013:414) critiques the whitening of
intersectionality studies, arguing that the decentring of race from intersectional approaches allowed white feminism to appropriate intersectionality and disregard the intellectual origins of intersectionality in Black feminism. This emphasises the stance that ‘feminists have theorized intersectionality from many perspectives’ (Lykke 2010, cited in Bilge 2013:414) and reduces the intellectual and political role of Black and women of colour’s feminist thought to ‘just another perspective’ (Bilge 2013:414), thereby denying the central role of Black and women of colour in generating the theoretical framework, as well as decentring race as a central element of intersectional thought. Bilge thus draws attention to the politics of knowledge production, arguing that “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 (Bilge 2013:412).

While this debate is often cast as one between white European feminist race avoidance and US Black and women of colour feminism, Lewis points out that an attempt to void intersectionality of engagement with race and racism affects racialised women in Europe, rendering them ‘uncomfortable and silenced’:

> In such circumstances speaking from that location—as an embodied-sentient subject who knows she is raced—felt risky because it might expose one to the risk of being deemed too emotional or of being reinscribed as knowing only about race.  
> (*Lewis 2013:883-4*)

This furthermore sidesteps meaningful engagement and critique of whiteness as a racialised social position. While these debates about the centrality of race and the role of Black and women of colour feminists in conceptualising intersectionality have not been resolved (Mugge et al. 2018), it is important to challenge the notion that Black women are too different to stand in for a generalizable theory about power and marginalization. The travels of intersectionality belie that concern. Actors of different genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations have moved intersectionality to engage an ever-widening range of experiences and structures of power. At the same time, the generative power of the continued interrogation of Black women’s experiences both domestically and internationally is far from exhausted.  
> (*Carbado et al. 2013:305*)

One of the questions raised in this debate is whether and how the concept of intersectionality can be applied to contexts outside of Black US women’s experiences without emptying it of meaning, in particular without devoicing it of its antiracist critique. A number of scholars have proposed ways to bring in the knowledges of racialised activists and intellectuals from a range of geographical contexts. The idea that race has no relevance in the European context is reinforced by marginalising, silencing and ignoring the contributions of scholars of colour within Europe (Bacchetta et al. 2015; Erel et al. 2010; Petzen 2012). Yet, within continental Europe, there are important ways in which activists and scholars commit to, and develop further, intersectional understandings of race and racism and have done so for decades, even where these are routinely ignored in the literature (e.g. Bassel and Emejulu 2018 for recent activism; for the German context, cf. e.g Apostolidou 1980; Kalpaka and Räthzel 1985; Oguntoye et al. 1986; Roig 2018). An example from two contrasting studies on the Kurdish and Turkish context demonstrates the importance of political values, as suggested in Yuval-Davis’ reflections on the politics of belonging (2006), rather than geography and...
cultural specificity for the ways in which the concept of intersectionality is applied. Bahar (2015) argues that gendered oppression by kin and ethnic group is key to understanding the subordination of Kurdish women migrants to Turkish cities, disavowing the structural racism and internal colonialism to which Kurds in Turkey have been subjected. In contrast to this, Al-Rebholz’s (2013) study on Kurdish and Turkish feminists emphasises the importance of an analysis of racism in Black feminist texts for Kurdish women’s engagement with feminism, as it was this engagement with racism that allowed Kurdish women to make feminism relevant to their own intersecting experiences of racist and sexist oppression.

This debate between White ‘disciplinary feminism’ (Bilge 2013) and intersectional scholars for whom race is central to the constitution of intersectionality, has not been resolved and is ongoing. Some of the positions within this debate are that intersectional research should focus on Black women and be delimited as such (Alexander-Floyd 2012). Others, such as Tomlinson (2013) and Bilge (2013) call on white feminist researchers to recognise and challenge their own racially privileged positioning in their research practice, which would involve actively desisting from appropriating and depoliticising the notion of intersectionality. Bilge (2013) argues that in some instances intersectional knowledge production may step back from claiming the term intersectional, if this would result in empowering subordinated groups without marginalising other subordinated groups. Another proposition for moving the debate forward is Hancock’s (2015:624) call to conceive of authors and activists’ relationship to the concept of intersectionality beyond the idea of ownership and appropriation through the notion of stewardship. She borrows the term stewardship from Indigenous women in Canada to denote the complex practices of engaging in interpretive communities of intersectionality. Yet, this debate remains unresolved and is likely to continue as long as the centrality of race and racism as forms of oppression, inequality and exploitation to the constitution of the social world are denied or minimised in academic as well as public debates.

Continuing relevance of intersectionality

As current societal developments in many parts of the world point to the continuing importance of racism, nationalism and gender oppression, intersectional approaches to understanding and challenging these will continue to be relevant. Three key points seem particularly important for future developments. One is the ways in which intersectional thought links with related methodological and theoretical projects; second, this particularly challenges intersectional thought to engage with global and transnational social justice projects; and third, intersectionality has been able to cross over beyond academia into social movements and everyday life.

Intersectional epistemologies recognise that knowledge is situated and partial (Collins 2009), and a closer engagement with related social justice knowledge projects such as decolonial approaches (Hancock 2016; Lugones 2007), participatory methods (e.g. Chmielewski et al. 2016), Indigenous methodologies (Smooth 2013) or theoretical frames of assemblages (Puar 2012) is likely to prove fruitful. Further developing a transnational understanding of the locally specific but globally constituted intersections of race and gender oppressions can contribute to bringing into being new political alliances, subjects and ways of knowing (Collins 2009). While intersectional approaches to gender and race have had immense influence in various academic disciplines and transnational contexts, they have also crossed over into mainstream debates and inspired a wide range of engagements by activists, social movements and wider readers. For example, Hancock (2016:13–4) notes that the citation figures of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and
Collins (2009, originally published in 1990) key works range between 9,948 and 12,002 which are exceptional for academic publications, testifying to the authors’ wide-ranging influence. Yet, in the first quarter of 2015 alone, Wikipedia’s entry on intersectionality has been viewed 86,734 times, demonstrating that debates on intersectionality have become part of debates beyond academia. This engagement is invigorated by recent publications from scholars who address an introductory or general readership (e.g. Collins and Bilge 2016; Romero 2017). As such, we can expect many more engagements, debates and developments of intersectional approaches in the future.

References


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