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Writing 2: Investigating Erasures

16 March 2020

### Intersectionality: A Tangible Aspect of the Feminist Agenda

The term “intersectionality” was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, a scholar who argues that systems of oppression cannot be understood independently, rather we must study how these forces interact with and strengthen one another. More specifically, Crenshaw highlights how the experience of being a black woman can only be understood through analyzing the ways in which both racism and sexism intersect to reinforce the roles of oppressor and oppressed. Crenshaw’s 1989 paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in which she articulated this theory serves as the starting point for my analysis of the modern feminist movement and how I would like to see it improve moving forward.

The feminism of my generation has adopted the term “intersectional,” but fails to implement the ideas behind this label in any meaningful way. From my own observations, many young women have been introduced to feminism with the misconception that the movement is more historical than it is modern. To call yourself a “feminist” has become popularized and even glamorized in today’s media and, more importantly, the adoption of this label requires no actual commitment to reform. White women in particular, including myself, enjoy such immense amounts of privilege that they fail to recognize that modern feminism has much more gravity than a social media post. It is considered favorable to appear socially conscious or politically

correct; however, this has led many to proudly identify with the movement with no useful knowledge of feminism as it stands today. The expansion of a youth culture built on notions of “awareness” has inevitably led to the growth of feminism’s popularity in recent years, but the continued absence of tangible change in the form of legislation or other measures.

As research surrounding these limitations has grown, several feminist scholars have emerged to instigate new measures that truly embody intersectionality, two of which being Gloria Anzaldúa and Tarana Burke. Anzaldúa has pioneered Chicana studies in universities and has contributed significantly to radical feminist scholarship, particularly in relation to the queer community (Anzaldúa 184). Her advocacy of women of color in academic fields has fought against the attempt to silence marginalized groups. She defends her unique positionality in an effort to legitimize the oppression women experience both domestically, as a result of cultural subjugation, and publicly, as a result of patriarchal power structures. The fierce vulnerability displayed in her writing illustrates a deep commitment to furthering the representation of women of color, particularly in scholarship surrounding feminism. Women are often condemned for showing such emotional transparency, but Anzaldúa utilizes her anger and frustration to assert her stake in such issues. I think it is exceptionally important for women to reclaim the stereotypes that have worked to undermine their credibility. Anzaldúa’s work embodies intersectionality because she acknowledges the importance of the historic feminist movement while demanding that women of color must move to the forefront of this discussion. Furthermore, activist Tarana Burke has also furthered the push for representation of women as much more than one dimensional characters. Burke is credited for founding the Me Too movement, which aimed to bring attention to the sexual abuse that has become commonplace in

professional and personal environments. The use of social media as a platform to spread awareness and encourage women to break their silence has helped to popularize a more inclusive understanding of feminism and women's issues in general (Burke 5). The strength of Burke's activism also lies in the assertion that women must empower one another, rather than allowing the patriarchy to foster competition among us. White feminism has largely contributed to this competitive approach to activism, as its rhetoric focuses on legitimizing the struggles of white women in opposition to those of women of color. In contrast, Burke recognizes that feminist progress must include all women, regardless of differing backgrounds. To me, Burke's message is one of true intersectionality as she emphasizes the importance of individual experiences in creating a collective understanding of how women's issues must be addressed - with urgency and with passion. The development of a shared consciousness is essential to unifying a movement built upon notions of equality because these definitions lend themselves to subjectivity.

It is absolutely essential for the current generation of activists, including myself, to contextualize our understanding of feminism within the historical progression of the movement. The distinct emergence of postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism, as explained by Sarah Banet-Wesier, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, all constitute vital facets of the larger feminist platform. Postfeminism rose to prominence as a way of explaining contradictory representations of women and making sense of how the "template for normative femininity" was evolving (Gill 5). Popular feminism as a theory illustrates how celebrity and consumer definitions of feminism have gained more media attention than legitimate attempts to dismantle patriarchal structures (Banet-Weiser 14). Neoliberal feminism has been articulated as a subset of white feminism that promotes purchasing power as the indicator of a woman's

liberation, rather than addressing the systemic nature of economic injustice as it pertains to women of color (Rottenberg 21). Each of these branches of feminist theory indicate the divisions that have emerged between white feminism and intersectionality. In order to arrive at a comprehensive and useful understanding of intersectional feminism, these divisions must be addressed as detrimental to the movement's overall strength.

Furthermore, the increasing interest in feminism has also generated confusion about what intersectionality truly means and how it can be used to create an effective platform. Scholar Kathy Davis argues that there are both benefits and limitations in the ambiguity of a term as encompassing as "intersectionality." While current support of intersectional feminism is widespread, the lack of clear theories and methodologies persists (Davis 26). However, Davis continually asserts that the emergence of intersectionality is the most important contribution to modern feminist theory and has the capacity to develop into a more successful platform. She argues that while critics have targeted the vague nature of "intersectionality" as a source of weakness, this ambiguity actually broadens the application of feminism to fields beyond women's studies, which strengthens the movement as a whole. This acknowledgement of the misunderstandings that have emerged around intersectionality is essential if the movement is to become more cohesive and unified moving forward. I too think that there is potential strength in the disparate facets of intersectional feminism; however, there is no unified front currently because white feminism stands staunchly in opposition to true feminism - intersectionality.

The realization of intersectionality would liberate members of society beyond the obvious stakeholders. While I am not a victim of the oppression I analyze, I am invested in this issue because I do not believe in progress that only benefits a certain group; rather I believe in

progress that enables growth on a much more expansive level. Feminism has the potential to liberate all genders and gender identities from the stereotypes that pervade our collective understanding of femininity and masculinity. It has been acknowledged that men too are victimized by the patriarchy, but still the vast majority of men remain unaware of how feminism can empower them given their active support. Again, many men claim to be “feminists” without a working understanding of what that label insinuates. Should feminism involve both men’s and women’s issues in substantive ways, the movement would more accurately embody the concepts contained in intersectionality. Not only does intersectional feminism involve shifting focus towards the struggles of marginalized women, it also highlights the role men must play if this platform is to achieve its goals. Feminism, by definition, is the fight for the equality of the sexes; thus, my demand for intersectionality is dependent upon my own acknowledgement of how what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be a man, must be more encompassing.

My personal awareness of feminism as a continually expanding movement largely begins with Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. I decided that in order to call myself a feminist I needed to read the literature that catalyzed the movement and continues to propel it forward. Friedan’s research was groundbreaking in 1963 and remains foundational in contemporary discussion surrounding feminism. Reading this book forced me to recognize how pervasive the influence of internalized misogyny continues to be on gender relations. My own mother is a victim of the “problem that has no name,” which Friedan described as an overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction among women who had given up their pursuit of education or a career to find fulfillment as a mother and housewife (Friedan 31). I can now understand that the shame my mother associates with her femininity is a product of a system which emphasized the inherent

weakness of womanhood in conjunction with the natural strength of men. She raised me with these same sexist values and, whether knowingly or unknowingly, continues to reinforce them despite her claims to be “progressive” or “liberal” or any other variety of vague terminology. I have been fortunate enough to recognize the hypocrisy of such values and am now committed to showing why these contradictions are so dangerous. My first introduction to sexism was in my own home and thus, I want to demonstrate that while the importance of the domestic sphere remains, women must change the way they view their roles in that space. More specifically, assuming the role of “wife” and “mother” should be an active choice for each woman, not a matter of forced obligation or societal expectation.

*The Feminine Mystique* illustrated the confining nature of the home at a point in history where the “happy housewife heroine” was the epitome of freedom for most Americans. Friedan emphasized how traditional gender roles were simply repackaged by the consumerism of the postwar period and reinforced using more subtle tactics. Advertisers catered to the growing feminist consciousness among women by marketing products, such as clothing, household appliances, accessories, and numerous other examples, as indicators of a woman’s liberation (Friedan 146). In other words, as women were increasingly becoming participants in the American consumer economy, the ability to purchase and possess items became synonymous with women’s freedom. A woman’s physical appearance and her role as a caretaker became markers of her empowerment, which remains embedded within the feminist agenda today. I find this trend incredibly problematic as it redirects feminism away from tangible reform and away from the meaningful realization of the term “intersectionality.” Moreover, while Freidan’s work was profoundly influential during the 1960s, she is largely responsible for instigating a “second

wave” of the feminist movement that focused solely upon the struggles and experiences of white, middle class women. Friedan’s articulation of the ties between domesticity and womanhood must be extended to include women of color who find liberation in their domestic roles as well as through participation in affairs beyond the “woman’s sphere.”

While I believe in the continued relevance of *The Feminine Mystique*, I think Friedan’s research must be re-evaluated within the conversation regarding intersectionality. Feminist scholar and writer Ursula Huws argues that consumerism combined with technological developments has in fact deepened the distinction between the separate spheres. Furthermore, these “advancements” have made it exponentially more difficult for women to escape their biological assignment to reproductive, and subsequently domestic, labor (Huws 34). The “political economy of housework” symbolizes the intersection between the various forms of oppression that intersectionality is aiming to combat, including sexism, classism, racism, and resulting economic and political disparities. Huws articulates the home as the epicenter of capitalism as it contains reproductive and productive labor, both of which are essential to the constant expansion of the consumer marketplace (Huws 57). Furthermore, she pinpoints the failures of modern feminist theory in addressing the need for domestic labor, despite its negative implications. Huws extends upon Friedan’s theory regarding the “ceaseless drudgery” of housework to suggest that intersectional feminism must acknowledge capitalism as another facet of patriarchal authority, which adapts her theories to our current climate. White feminism has circumvented systemic issues by focusing their campaign on “inclusivity” and “empowerment” within the confines of capitalistic exploitation, rather than addressing how this economic system has solidified the separation between the roles of working men and women.

This effort to expand historical feminist work to fit a contemporary context is a centerpiece of modern research surrounding intersectionality, much of which aims to restructure the mainstream understanding of feminism that is rooted in misogyny. There seems to be a common consensus among the scholars in this field that the term “intersectionality” is not inherently problematic, rather it is the way in which its implications are understood and executed that has weakened the feminist agenda. Scholar Nikol Alexander-Floyd argues that an intersectional feminist movement remains a goal that has yet to be reached because black women are continually typecasted and marginalized, particularly in professional fields. She asserts that the increased focus on black women as subjects of feminist research, which emerged mainly during the 1980s and 1990s, has ultimately led to the weakening of black feminism as an independent movement (Alexander-Floyd 16). More specifically, the recent hyperfocus on intersectionality by white feminist scholars has caused an attempt to commodify black womanhood under the guise of inclusivity in the social sciences. Alexander-Floyd identifies “intersectionality” as a valuable contribution to feminist scholarship, but maintains her argument that the subsequent focus on race and status labels has resulted in a failure to address the need for more expansive social and political change. I too have observed, both in academic and personal settings, this push to distinguish among people using generic, all-encompassing labels that claim to enable mutual understanding of one another, but actually serve to divide us all further into “us” and “them.” American culture is obsessed with labels and other superficial classifications and such a tendency has redirected conversations about gender equality towards how to quantify our differences, rather than how to overcome such limitations in a meaningful way.



Furthermore, intersectionality has become the primary method through which feminist scholars attempt to theorize systemic injustice, which necessitates a push to address how accurately such a term encompasses the various facets of oppression. In her paper “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” Jennifer Nash details the internal divisions within the feminist movement and how such tensions have highlighted the ways in which the feminist agenda must improve in order to be effective as a social and political platform. Mainly Nash discusses the vague definition of intersectionality and the lack of a defined methodology as prevalent obstacles to the realization of the term as it was originally conceived by Crenshaw. She encourages scholars to confront the ambiguity in these terms as the effective study of identity and oppression requires a more complex and nuanced approach (Nash 29). Again a hyperfocus on divisive labels has prohibited modern feminist scholarship from addressing the lack of concrete definitions and identifying the best ways to navigate such ambiguities. Ultimately, I believe that the imprecise nature of intersectionality is a source of strength as it enables those who are not obvious stakeholders in women’s issues to explore how the feminist agenda should apply to them as well.

Despite the limitations of intersectionality in our contemporary climate, I want to see movement towards activism that promotes a “tolerance for ambiguity.” Anzaldúa’s other significant contribution to feminist scholarship is her work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which details how the consciousness of the “new Mestiza” involves embracing the contradictions contained in a multifaceted sense of selfhood (Anzaldúa 101). For women of color in particular, their existence is largely defined by the intersections of oppression they must continually work to overcome. The concept of intersectionality encompasses that dedication to internalize the ambiguities in one’s own identity in order to foster acceptance and compassion for others.

However, this rhetoric is not passive in the slightest. Rather, intersectional feminism translates to an unwavering commitment to combating the pervasiveness of the patriarchy in all elements of our society. A balance must be made between acknowledging the legitimacy of our different experiences as women, and understanding the need to transcend those divisions in order to move forward collectively as feminists and as human beings committed to progress.

I define intersectionality, in its most concrete form, as the way in which forms of racial, sexist, economic, political, and social disparities intersect to create systems of oppression that reinforce and enable one another. With this definition in mind, I see no other option but for the feminist agenda to actively acknowledge the disparities between the struggles of white women and women of color. Each of the scholars I referenced throughout my research illustrate the continuing need to validate our experiences as individuals without overshadowing those of others. In regards to making intersectionality a tangible aspect of the feminist platform, I think the development of mutual awareness will allow for the emergence of legislation that reflects more encompassing reforms. Societal injustices are undoubtedly vast and often activists are only able to target specific, narrow facets of the larger issues at hand. However, the proponents of intersectionality recognize their limited capacity to enact the goals of this movement in their totality. Such an acknowledgement enables modern feminists to more effectively navigate the complexities of the issues they analyze and intend to dismantle. I myself plan to continually expand my understanding of feminism, as I have only begun to scratch the surface of this discussion surrounding intersectionality. I remain committed to the fight for gender equality and all its implications, as I believe we all should in order to see the progress we theorize about.

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