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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Intersectionality and Disciplinarity: Reflections from an International Perspective

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The concept of intersectionality generates much debate amongst interdisciplinary feminist scholars. The paradigm has become a central disciplinary device for feminist scholarship. Indeed, the National Women's Studies Association identifies "the conceptual claims and theoretical practices of intersectionality" as a foundation of the "discipline" of Women's Studies.¹ Meanwhile, intersectional approaches have also begun to transform feminist approaches within the conventional disciplines.² Intersectionality has become a defining discursive device within feminist scholarship, often serving, variously, as a symbolic marker of inclusion, multiculturalism, difference, and race. The increasingly ubiquitous use of "intersectionality" has sparked a growing debate on the precise meaning, applicability, and value of the concept. Much of this debate occurs with relatively surface references to individual authors and is devoid of a deeper understanding of the intellectual history and conceptual depth of the term. Ange-Marie Hancock's *An Intellectual History of Intersectionality* provides a welcome corrective to some of the quagmires of this debate. The book provides an important analysis of the development of the concept in both activist and intellectual contexts and helps us move beyond some of the problems that have arisen as intersectionality has gained currency within the US academy. It navigates such questions through a complex analysis that addresses both disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates and seeks to integrate frameworks of discussion that address both US and international issues.

One of the most powerful dimensions of Hancock's book is her framing of her intellectual history as an ethical project of stewardship rather than a territorial claim of ownership of the concept of intersectionality. As she eloquently notes,

If we think of a steward as someone entrusted as caring for valuables that she does not herself own, then my role is to not only disavow ownership of intersectionality, but to remember that while I am permitted to use it, I must do so ethically, which entails producing projects that hopefully leave intersectionality scholars better equipped to engage in knowledge production projects in intersectionality studies.³

Conceiving of an analysis of the emergence, evolution, and deployment of intersectionality as an ethical project opens up the intellectual space to consider both the possibilities and

¹"What is Women's Studies," *National Women's Studies Association*, available online at: <<http://www.nwsa.org/womens-studies>> (accessed July 17, 2015).

²See, for example, Elizabeth Cole, "Intersectionality and Research in Psychology," *American Psychologist* 64:3 (2009), pp. 170–180. For a critical discussion of the disciplinary appropriation of intersectionality, see Nikol Alexander-Floyd, "Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era," *Feminist Formations* 24:1 (2012), pp. 1–25.

³Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2016).

limits of intersectional approaches. As Hancock notes, one of the key dimensions of her discussion of stewardship concerns the global reach of intersectionality.⁴ Indeed, the propensity for US academic paradigms to travel across borders in ways that may be laden with transnational circuits of power intensifies the imperative to consider the ethical dimensions of intersectional approaches from an international perspective.

As intersectionality has become institutionalized within the United States, it has also increasingly been transmitted to new spaces and sites outside of the US. These spaces range from international non-governmental organizations (such as development-oriented organizations) that tend to occupy hegemonic positions vis à vis women's movements to grass-roots activist organizations of women who seek to challenge the dominant frames of women's organizations in comparative contexts. The effects of the travel of intersectionality thus vary greatly and cannot be simply cast as either a site of intellectual subversion or domination. When intersectionality is treated as another buzzword that is implemented through top-down transnational institutional agendas, it begins to take on the familiar historical frame where western knowledge production has been imposed on colonized and post-colonial contexts. However, unlike other paradigms and concepts that travel across national borders, intersectionality itself represents a methodological approach, a theoretical concept, and the basis for inclusionary activist agendas that has sought to contest dominant frames of western knowledge production from within "the West." In this context, intersectional approaches provide the possibilities for the emergence of collaborative subjugated knowledges and programs of activism across national borders. Hancock's work points to this possibility when she alludes to the examples of Kurdish women who "called out the racism and ethnocentrism of their Turkish counterparts, who translated white American and British feminists for local engagement but omitted Black feminist thought, which turned out to have the greatest resonance for Kurdish women activists" (p. 26). Indeed, the terrain of feminism is always a contested space, and women who occupy subordinated social locations (whether of race, ethnicity, caste, class, sexuality, or religion) have always contested the dominant frames of women's movements that have been shaped by more privileged women. The critical question that Hancock's work raises is whether and how intersectional approaches can serve as a point of collaboration, conversation, and engagement across national borders rather than yet another US-based frame that travels to the rest of the world. The stewardship of intersectionality would thus need to carefully navigate both historical and contemporary transnational relations of power that undergird all US-based forms of feminist thought.⁵

Hancock's work provides important conceptual terrain that can productively direct the trajectories of collaborative intellectual work from an international perspective. This terrain is marked by her argument that intersectionality is "an analytical approach to understanding between-category relationships *and* a project to render previously invisible, unaddressed material effects of Black women's/women of color's sociopolitical location visible and remediable."⁶ This kind of epistemological project that Hancock articulates can form an entry point for the consideration of connections between subjugated knowledges across national borders. The project of understanding "between-category" relationships lends itself to comparative and international understandings of marginalized social groups that fall between

⁴Ibid., 26.

⁵I elaborate on these questions in Leela Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics and Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁶Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*.

the cracks of approaches that deploy discrete categories (or variables) or single identity framings. Meanwhile, the project of rendering visible the material effects of black women's/women of color's socio-political framings can lead to points of connection with groups of women within comparative contexts who also occupy subjugated positions within the category of "women" that need to be rendered visible.⁷

However, it is precisely this dual project that has been at risk of disappearing within disciplinary feminist appropriations of intersectional analysis.⁸ The disciplining of intersectionality has more often than not meant the incorporation of intersectionality within the dominant methodological paradigms of disciplines such as Political Science or Sociology. For instance, Hancock makes powerful points regarding the appropriation of intersectionality through a foundation of positivist epistemology which "underestimates the ontological, epistemological and methodological changes required for intersectionality."⁹ Thus, as she notes, such approaches that have become mainstreamed in the Social Sciences rest on an underlying epistemological framework that implicitly presume the "analytical severability of categories" that miscast the ontological project of intersectionality.¹⁰

The disciplining of intersectionality research has particularly significant implications for international research for both analyses concerned with between-category analysis and research that seeks to render visible the materiality of social groups such as women who are marked in distinctive ways by caste, class, and religion. Consider the case of working class women in India.¹¹ In-depth ethnographic research reveals that the boundaries that delineate relationships between gender, class, and community (caste and religion) are in practice political, discursive, and material boundaries that are constructed and reproduced within sites such as the labor market, working class family, unions, and community organizations.¹² In this context, exclusionary representations of class, gender, and community (produced within these sites) produce material hierarchies between workers and place working class women from specific castes and religious communities in distinctive subordinated socio-economic locations. However, such processes are only rendered visible by research and epistemological practices that break from the dominant norms of positivist epistemology. Empirical understandings of the nature of the gendered, community-based production of class formation and class politics in India have been displaced precisely by the longstanding norms of positivist empiricism. Such norms have misrepresented conceptions of class, gender, and community as discrete variables or identities that are then represented by discrete organizational forms (where unions are codes of class consciousness and community organizations of class and caste identity). The result

⁷Hancock rightly challenges critics that claim that the focus on black women marginalizes other women of color. For instance, transnational exchanges between activists, leaders, and knowledge producers have long historical roots. Consider two well-known examples: India's leading Dalit nationalist leader B.R. Ambedkar corresponded with W.E. Dubois. Critics who fault the emphasis on black women certainly draw on dominant paradigms of mainstream feminist thought (including feminist post-structuralism and post-humanist work). This should give us pause when we consider narratives of Black feminist intellectual dominance.

⁸Alexander-Floyd, "Disappearing Acts."

⁹Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*.

¹⁰Ibid. See for instance Hancock's important critical discussion of Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *SIGNS: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 30:3 (2005), pp. 1771–1800 and S. Laurel Weldon, "Intersectionality," in Gary Goertz and Amy Mazur (eds), *Politics, Gender and Concepts: Theory and Methodology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 99–102, 193–218.

¹¹For purposes of discussion I draw on examples from my own area of expertise based on research on the intersections of gender, class, caste, and religion in contemporary India.

¹²Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

is the categorical complexities of the relationship between class, gender, caste, and religion have been rendered invisible, and the ontological formation of the mutual constitution of such categories has required epistemological and methodological practices that must necessarily break from the confines of narrowly defined projects of positivist empiricism.

The project of capturing intersectionality and yoking it to a narrower positivist empiricist project¹³ in fact, then, inadvertently represents a form of epistemological violence—one that is defined by an explicit reversal of the ethical and epistemological project of intersectional and feminist of color analyses. Such analyses have sought to foreground the practices, experiences, identities, and politics that conceptions of discrete categories have rendered invisible and called attention to the material violence that subordinated social groups (such as black women in the US and working class women in India). As Hancock argues, this requires understanding the ontological project of intersectionality research—one that specifically contests and transforms the conception of the “empirical” that narrower feminist positivist appropriations have conflated with “empiricism.”

The epistemological and ontological projects of intersectionality provide important possibilities for intellectual engagements between US feminist of color scholarship and international feminist theory and research that has long been focused on both the relationship between categorical differences and the political and material conditions of subaltern social groups. There are, for instance, long histories of activism and intellectual thought that have sought to conceptualize the experiences, identities, and lives of women whose social locations are shaped by the mutual constitution of various forms of inequality. The question that the ethical stewardship of intersectionality for which Hancock calls raises, then, is how this engagement can occur in ways that do not simply reproduce a US-centric narrative of knowledge production onto complex intellectual histories that vary for different locations and national contexts. Hancock’s work makes two substantive points that can enhance such a project. First, she presents her book as “an” intellectual history of intersectionality rather than “the” intellectual history of intersectionality. Such an acknowledgment is important, given that intersectional empirical research that both does not focus on US contexts and does not adopt positivist empiricist projects is generally written out of most intellectual debates and histories. Such debates and histories as Hancock and Alexander-Floyd have both argued are shaped by a politics of citationality that often exclude the varied and complex contributions of numerous feminists of color both within and outside of the United States. Second, Hancock’s work outlines some of the complex intellectual terrain that surrounds the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality studies in this context is an epistemological and ontological project that coexists with, interacts with, and builds on a much wider range of scholarly debates including (but not limited to) difference, race, postcoloniality, and multiculturalism. From an international perspective, studies of between-category relationships and of subjugated knowledges and subaltern groups of women has intellectual genealogies that overlap with US-based conceptions of intersectionality but are not reducible to US feminist theory and research. Such histories point then to places where fruitful intellectual engagements between US-based intersectionality studies and internationally oriented scholarship can continue to develop. However, such histories also caution against casting the intellectual history of the mutual constitution of categories and the focus on marginalized groups of women as an intellectual story of theory and scholarship on the United States.

¹³McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality.”

Hancock's book opens up the space to consider such broader streams of thought that are not precisely defined by the concept of intersectionality, but have long been focused on questions of category formation and subaltern social groups that are shaped by multiple forms of inequality. Thus, the book productively seeks to "broaden our understanding of the ideas that have contributed to intersectionality-like thinking, broadly construed."¹⁴ However, there are also serious risks inherent in the epistemological move of using the discursive framing "intersectionality-like" to capture a wide and complex field of scholarship, which as Hancock herself notes, predates the term "intersectionality." From an international perspective, using the term "intersectionality-like" to frame diverse local, national, and global intellectual histories contains within it the serious risk of flattening out and absorbing such histories within a singular US-driven intellectual genealogy (even though it is one that challenges dominant feminist narratives within the United States). Indeed, much of the discussion in Hancock's work outlines terrain on US-based feminist theory and the analysis of global scholarship does not locate such "intersectionality-like" thinking within the intellectual genealogies, historical contexts, and local and national political and discursive debates in the places where they have emanated. Of course, there are constraints to what can be done in one book. However, the heuristic device "intersectionality-like" risks serving as a discursive disciplinary practice that flattens out the complexity of international feminist thought (that emanates from various local and national contexts) in much the same way as "intersectionality" has been flattened out by both practitioners of citational politics and surface critics of the concept.

The ethical stewardship of intersectionality studies that Hancock rightly calls for thus becomes fraught with complications if the global reach of paradigms are to become more than US national imaginations of the world. This is not an easy endeavor. As I have argued elsewhere:

One of the challenges for interdisciplinary women's studies scholars is to be able to provide a complex intellectual genealogy of feminist thought that addresses (1) the U.S. feminist of color interventions, (2) the distinctive feminist histories in comparative and global perspectives that have their own intellectual genealogies, and (3) the points of convergence between the first two strands that may arise at particular historical periods through particular transnational connections such as migration or diasporic politics.¹⁵

This task has paradoxically become more difficult as interdisciplinary feminist scholarship has become constrained by the disciplining of "Women's Studies." The assertion of intersectionality and transnationalism as foundations of what is increasingly cast as a new disciplinary formation of Women's Studies more often than not institutionalizes US conceptions of the "transnational" and indeed of the "world."¹⁶ The intellectual openness within Hancock's work provides an entry point for such debates to deepen amongst feminist scholars.

Hancock's *An Intellectual History of Intersectionality* provides the intellectual space for productive and much needed conversations about how concepts such as intersectionality are institutionalized and appropriated and how they can be reinvigorated through a return to the complex histories and theoretical terrain that have produced them. It is a valuable book that should be read by anyone interested in a nuanced discussion of intersectionality.

¹⁴Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*.

¹⁵Leela Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism in the United States*, p. 169.

¹⁶See the mission statement, "What is Women's Studies," available online at: <<http://www.nwsa.org/womensstudies>> (accessed July 31, 2015). I develop an extended critical discussion of the paradigm of transnational feminism in Fernandes, 2013.

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Notes on Contributor

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