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Book Review: Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons

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***Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons.* Anna Carastathis, 2016. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln & London. 272 pages. 1 illustration. \$55.00 Hardcover.**

Reviewed by Wendy Wright¹

We mostly do intersectionality wrong—and in ways that actually might recreate the very forms of oppression and erasure that intersectionality was developed to resist. So Anna Carastathis argues in her new text *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*. A very basic definition of intersectionality is that an analysis that only engages one aspect of a person's identity, for example, their gender, cannot account for those who are oppressed based on multiple aspects, such as race *and* gender. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that attempts to create possibilities for such accounting. Carastathis begins her analysis by arguing that Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, when mobilized in under-theorized, depoliticized terms, will not achieve its intended ends, but instead can even be used to stymie genuine emancipatory progress. This accords with other recent investigations into progressive frames being used in regressive ways, such as Sara Ahmed's argument about the work of diversity workers on campuses in *On Being Included*, wherein simply by employing diversity workers, the institution has created a means of plausible deniability—when critiques are made institutions simply point to the bodies and offices of diversity, as evidence that they are in the right camp.² Carastathis argues that in many scholarly spaces, including research, teaching, and disciplinary structures, intersectionality is touted similarly—name dropped in course titles and research interest lists—but is often employed in flat terms. These flat terms denature Crenshaw's rich foundation, rendering intersectionality into everything and nothing, undermining a political potential that Carastathis identifies as radically transformative.

The project takes full form not in the critique, however, but instead in the corrective Carastathis offers, which ranges from a careful explication of Crenshaw's thought to an exploration of the political possibilities created by an invigorated intersectional approach. Beginning with a historicization of Black feminist theorizing on complex identity, Carastathis emphasizes that intersectionality not only has a long intellectual and political, but offers something distinct from other theories of black women's positions. Carastathis builds out a typology of conceptual frames that have been offered to resist the oppression of black women on axes of both race and gender, from Anna Julia Cooper's addressing of both "'a woman question' and 'a race problem,'" to contemporary theories, such as Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination" model. This typology would be particularly useful for advanced undergraduates or graduate students, who will benefit not only from the overview of the intellectual history, but also from the conceptual precision modeled.

Chapters 2 and 3 guide the reader through close readings of Crenshaw's work. In the second chapter, Carastathis engages the two key metaphors of intersectionality: the intersection and the basement. Her central goal here is to push back against critiques who say that intersectionality is reducible to mere "buzzword" or is excessively "vague," suggesting instead that those criticisms are grounded in a lack of rigor on the part of the critics, rather than something lacking in

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² Ahmed, Sara. *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press, 2012.

intersectionality itself. By a close reading of the basement—which is largely overlooked in the dominant literature—and the intersection, Carastathis re-complicates our thinking on the well-known theory. Her explication of the “basement” as a central frame of intersectionality is particularly useful, as it re-centralizes the role of the law and governing institutions in the production of oppression. By focusing on institutional power, the basement metaphor emphasizes structures and positionality, thus creating a ward against common criticisms of identity politics. That is, the basement metaphor emphasizes that intersectionality is not about how the marginalized *feel*, it is instead about analyzing the systems that marginalize. In the basement metaphor, Crenshaw is describing “social hierarchy;” the basement is deep, full of people standing on the shoulders of people below. The people on the top layer of shoulders can reach the ceiling of the basement and climb or be pulled through. Non-intersectional anti-discrimination law provides a hatch for those who are just below the ceiling’s level to climb through. However, these forms of law leave those who are multiply disadvantaged that much further from the ground floor—not only are they still fairly far away from the hatch, but they don’t even have someone with a view of the hatch to report back! Legal structures that cannot account for complex social disadvantage also cannot mitigate or ameliorate damaging positions—the rising tide only lifts those who already have seaworthy ships. The basement metaphor, in conjunction with the more widely considered metaphor of the intersection, together provide the rich basis of the intersectional framework which Carastathis uses as the foundation for further theorizing.

Carastathis continues her close reading with an exegetical approach to Crenshaw’s footnote in *Mapping the Margins*, that intersectionality is a “provisional concept” which recognizes that race and gender must be addressed within their sociohistorical situations, but that as constructs, these categories will require different forms of address in different spaces and at different times. The idea of the provisional concept is challenging, as it is fundamentally a refusal. To understand the role of the provision, one must return to the original problem Crenshaw identified as being solved by it. At the moment that Crenshaw is articulating a theory of intersectionality, postmodernism had hit its highest point of despair. The lack of certainty that is the characteristic of postmodern epistemology contains within it a potentially paralyzing politics. To wit, if there is no way to know whether we are on a road to fascism or Enlightenment, how is one to choose any action at all? Crenshaw’s answer to this in intersectionality is an insistence on a materialism of institutions; we may not be able to know the entire path towards emancipation, but if we attend to specific structures of oppression as they relate to real people’s lives—specifically, but not by any means exclusively, black women’s—we can at least plan a next step, and from there, we can reassess and plan once again. At that point, down the line, the provisional concept may require revision, but its express status as provisional not only permits, but demands that kind of self-critique in service to a more rigorous orientation towards freedom.

In an interesting structural choice, Carastathis conducts a comprehensive literature review in her fourth chapter. Organizing the literature that critiques intersectionality into eight conceptually driven categories, Carastathis offers a robust engagement with the field. Here, Carastathis’s championing of intersectionality feels perhaps too strong. Throughout, she claims criticisms of intersectionality are addressed to simulacra of intersectionality, rather than the theoretical framework in its fullness. Carastathis may, however, be trying to make intersectionality do too much. Through Carastathis’s reading of intersectionality, the theory is capable not only of resisting nearly all critical approaches, but also of encompassing the virtues offered by critical alternatives. Whether this is fully so or not, Carastathis’s call for greater rigor in theorizing complex oppression is necessary.

Carastathis continues her close reading in chapter five, tracing Crenshaw's attempt to redefine the relationship between coalitional politics and identity politics. Carastathis points to the resolving element in intersectional theory where rather than framing identity and coalition as opposing political models, through intersectionality we might understand identity *as* coalition. By pushing against essentialist views of race and gender (and other traditional identity groups), intersectionality recognizes the diversity *within* groups, which thus becomes a model for thinking about how to build solidarity *across* diverse populations. Further, intersectionality, as it disrupts traditional categories has the potential to transform the ways that difference itself is understood, as a source of resilience and creativity instead of as the site for conflict. Exploring the political realities of intersectionality as coalitional politics, Carastathis introduces a case study of Somos Hermanas, an activist group made up primarily of American women of color, who sent a delegation to Sandinista Nicaragua in 1984, in an act of solidarity opposing Reagan's anti-socialist agenda. Reports and reflections on this visit articulate the complex, complicated coalitional politics that emerged. Carastathis, building on the words of the women involved, identifies the possibility of solidarity as being a result of an identification of the common institutional and political powers that oppressed both groups of women. Thus, the coalition is built upon the collective refusal, rather than a tenuous identification of common experience—avoiding the worries that infinite regression will inevitably lead to disaggregation. While the materialism of intersectionality does not solve, in a simple, formulaic way, all of the challenges posed by postmodern political critiques, it does offer a real process by which political action can be taken, while also creating clear checks on that action. Areas for further research here might put intersectionality in conversation with more traditional genealogies of critical theory, such as Adorno's negative dialectics and Marcuse's great refusal.

In her final chapter, Carastathis puts her more complicated (than usual) intersectionality into conversation with some current approaches in decolonial feminisms. She discusses ways both that an intersectional approach might enrich other approaches, but also how decolonial approaches might augment intersectional analyses. For example, border thinking "can reveal how the mapping of the world from an ostensibly [neutral...] viewpoint is, in actuality inflected by and suffused with racial and gendered power" (p. 212). This chapter is less a systematic argument than a series of illustrations of the kinds of insights that might be possible in engagements with native feminisms, border feminisms, and decolonial feminisms. In addition to the exploration of intersectionality's relationship to other feminisms from the margins, Carastathis also uses this discussion to critique the persistent whiteness of the field of Women's & Gender Studies, which tends to marginalize both intersectionality and decolonial scholars. This discussion is useful even for those outside of WGS departments, as it offers an analysis of the ways that legitimate institutional constraints can be mobilized in ways that retrench progress towards radical transformations of the academy.

Overall, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* is a call for theoretical rigor as a path toward a more emancipatory scholarship and activism. It holds feminist analysis to account for subverting the political urgency of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorizing, identifying the intrinsic dominance of white supremacy in that subversion. It functions as a useful reminder about due diligence for all scholars interested in intersectionality, as well as being deeply instructive for emerging intersectional scholars. It is also deeply refreshing to have serious feminist theorizing done with clarity and precision. The stark difference between Carastathis's cogent, straightforward writing versus some of the theory she quotes is fairly remarkable. This is a strong contribution to the field of intersectionality studies.