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Dieuwertje Dyi Huijg

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Tension in Intersectional Agency; A Theoretical Discussion of the Interior Conflict of White, Feminist Activists' Intersectional Location

By Dieuwertje Dyi Huijg¹

Abstract

In this article I question the wholeness of the agency of white, feminist activists. Drawing on intersectional theory, I problematise the multiplicative character of their location in order to be able to understand how intersectional agency operates. This location reveals three layers of intersectionality; the junction of axes of social signification (gender and race); the junction of manifestations on these axes (female and white); and the junction of, subsequent, positions in power relations (disadvantaged and advantaged). I argue that this is specifically important and complex when we explore how whiteness can operate intersectionally. This results in three observations. First, this intersectional junction is conflictive in its interior; race as advantage and gender as disadvantage can operate as opposite structuring forces in power relations. Second, feminist activism is characterised by gendered action and aims at social transformation in the realm of gender. Whiteness, on the other hand, is often marked by racial passivity and omission via which it can invest in the maintenance of the racial status quo and non-change; this contradicts feminist objectives. Third, contra the conflation of agency with action, I agree that not every action is agentic. If not every action is agentic, then not all agency generates action. In turn, this means that agency can also result in omission; 'something' which is not action, i.e. an absence or void of action or, what I call, inaction. We can say that inaction is a familiar manifestation of hegemonic processes as whiteness. In turn, we can see that gender and race as structuring forces, subsequently, shape agency contradictorily, which can generate action and inaction simultaneously. The differentiation of layers in intersectional theory suggests that the agency of white, feminist activists is mobilised within a conceptual opposition in power relations that, consequently, questions the 'wholeness' of intersectional agency.

Keywords: Intersectional theory, Agency, White women

Introduction

Racism affects both black and white people, but the effects are different; racial discrimination has disadvantageous consequences for black people, but secures (the maintenance of the system of) race privilege for the latter. (Bento, 2003, p. 147). Whiteness, argued Frankenberg (1997, pp. 8-9), expresses "the idea that there is a category of people identified and self-identifying as 'white', situated within this simultaneous operation of race and racism. White, then corresponds to one place in racism as a system of categorization and subject formation, just as the terms race

¹ (Dieuwertje.Huijg@manchester.ac.uk) Dieuwertje Dyi Huijg is a PhD candidate in Sociology, University of Manchester. Her project concerns the intersectional agency of racially privileged young, feminist activists from São Paulo. Relying on a phenomenological methodology, she aims at understanding how, in the context of opposite positions in power relations, intersectional agency is experienced, negotiated, mobilised and (re)produced by the individual who aims at social change. This research is grounded in her activist background in the women's movement in the Netherlands and Brazil.

privileged and race dominant name particular places within racism as a system of domination.”. Intersectional agency, as I suggest in the title, is – at least on an analytical level – intrinsically tensional in the case of white, feminist activists; it is their whiteness, as an *advantageous* location in relations of power that complicates their agency. I argue that it is important to develop a more complex model of intersectionality in order to include the working of whiteness in its analysis. Consisting of three layers of analysis, this model draws attention to intersectionality as a framework of *power* relations. With white feminist activism in mind, this model demands, subsequently, the consideration of two possible manifestations of agency, namely action and, what I name, *inaction* - the void or absence of action.

To present this problem, I would like to introduce you to Juliana². She participated in a research project (2005-06) on the everyday experiences with race privilege for which I interviewed young, white³, female activists from São Paulo. Her reflections might differ in degree and form from the other participants and other (young) white feminists but demonstrate similar tension with respect to intersectional agency.

Juliana: “It makes me feel uncomfortable to define me as white. [...] there is the whole [historical] weight that you carry with you being white. You being white, you are the oppressive being of racism. [...] As an institution, man represents the oppressor and woman the oppressed. In the racial question it is the same thing; White represents the oppressor and black the oppressed” “[I] do not like to know that I am in a better position because of being white.” “I am super contra racism.” “Maybe because I am a woman and I know what it is to be a victim in some situations, I end up transposing this also to other situations: ‘I suffer this for being a woman, and he suffers this for being a black’” “[I] am more involved in other issues, I follow the racial question little, but the little I follow, I, like, admire.”

Juliana racially self-identifies as white and situates herself in the system of racism. She recognises the structural privilege that her racial position grants her as well as its historical context. She is also explicit about the uncomfortable feelings this consciousness brings her. In a multi-axes context, though, Juliana dislocates from race to gender (what I will later call layer 1) in order to jump in power relations from advantage to disadvantage (layer 3). Now she focuses on her female position (layer 2 as a manifestation of layer 1) and, through the comparison of different forms of social inequality, connects structural disadvantageous complications of her own gender position with the disadvantageous complications black people encounter on the axis of race.

As a feminist activist herself, Juliana vocalises strong opposition to the system of racism. This ideological persuasion is accompanied by feelings of admiration for those who struggle against racial inequality. Also her own activism is formed by a struggle against inequality, i.e. for the improvement of her individual and categorical position on the axes of gender and sexuality. But despite this and despite her discursive support of the

² Juliana is a pseudonym.

³ Though all activists experience race privilege, their actual racial identity is often more complex than ‘white’ (see Huijg, 2011).

struggle against racism, her feminist activism is not practically informed by her racially privileged position and consciousness. Intersectionally, the agentic manifestation in her activism demonstrates a tensional relation to its objective of social change. On the axis of gender she manifests her agency actively (through feminism), on the axis of race, though, her activist agency is simultaneously marked by omission (inaction).

In accordance with Nash's call (2008, p. 10) to understand the intersectional agency of white feminists, it is necessary to explore the different ways the axes of race and gender operate and specifically how whiteness can work in relation to feminist activist agency. White feminists have an ambiguous relation to their whiteness; they might identify as white and recognise the racially privileged consequences of this position, but this recognition can equally flourish in its omission in feminist activist praxis, i.e. when anti-racism is non-performative (Ahmed, 2004). And even if they *do* (practically) engage with anti-racism, it is not necessarily, as other interviews showed (Huijg, 2011), that they act *as white* activists in the struggle against racial inequality and discrimination. Ideologically, they make a distinction in their activism between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the system that oppresses, those who belong to that system and those who suffer from that oppression. Their struggle opposes this system, which facilitates their gendered activism. As women they are not part of the oppressive side in the system of inequalities; their struggle is directed outwards, against the sexist system and/or men who 'represent the oppressor'. From their racial position, however, they are included in this system and benefit from its subsequent social inequality; if they do not individually oppress (in potency), they do, as Juliana exemplified, 'represent the oppressor'. This creates tension between their position on the axis of gender and that on the axis of race; representationally, they are located both inside and outside the system that they, at least ideologically and discursively, oppose.

In this essay, though, I will not analyse fieldwork data, but theoretically explore the intersectional tension outlined above. In order to do that, I will briefly explore the history of intersectionality, give an impression of intersectional theory and situate white feminists therein. Then I will propose, first, that intersectionality should not solely be understood as the *junction of axes of social signification* but also as the *junction of positions in power relations*. Second, in order to uncover this tension in relation to power, I will argue for the differentiation of *layers of intersectional analysis*. In the context of power relations in the system of racism, as Wildman and Davis (1995, p. 95) pointed out, "what we do not say, what we do not talk about, allows the status quo to continue"; also by not acting (not saying, not being involved, etc), as Juliana's excerpt can be read, one can contribute to the maintenance or the modification of – gender or race – relations of power. This, lastly, brings the necessity to the forefront to explore agency (in the second part of the article) in multiple ways and, contra the conflation of agency with action, analyse agency exercised via both action and inaction.

Towards Intersectionality

In the Second Wave, 'Global Sisterhood' was the (supposed) grounds for commonality between women, which "despite variations in degree [was] experienced by all human beings who are born female." (Morgan 1984 in Mohanty, 1995, p. 73). Morgan asked: "*Do we not, after all, recognize one another?*" (Ibid, p. 77) '*No!*' contradicted black and other feminists clearly. Via the monism of feminism (King, 1988), in which

gender is taken as a “single analytical category” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771), the “double oppression” (Torrey, 1979), “intersectional marginalization” (Strolovitch, 2006), “multiple jeopardy” (King, 1988) or the “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990) of sexism and racism were neglected. ‘Global Sisterhood’ was “an ahistorical notion of the sameness of [women’s] oppression” (Mohanty, 1995, p. 74) that, via the denial of the specific location of hegemonic femininities (where racial analysis uncovers its whiteness), obscured intra-group differences. In response to this ‘common’ experience and long before ‘intersectionality’ was introduced as such, feminists of colour⁴ questioned their marginalisation, the exclusion of the ‘specificity’ of their gendered and raced experiences and demanded recognition of sexism and racism as simultaneous markers of black and ethnic minority women’s lives outside and inside the women’s movement and feminism and, doing so, revealed its whiteness. (Carrilho, 1981; Essed, 1982; Gonzalez, 1981; hooks, 1981; Roland, 2000; Santos, 1999; Torrey, 1979)

The theory of intersectionality, following the aforementioned ‘theoretical and political commitment’ (Nash, 2008, p. 3), was an analytical response to the myth of racially neutral gendered sameness (hooks, 1997, pp. 167-169) and its subsequent whiteness. It was the theoretical end to the singular notion of ‘woman’, which, with the recognition of inter-axis differences and a theoretical turn to intra-axis differences, turned into the notion of ‘women’. (Crenshaw, 1991) Where the idea of woman pointed to a homogenising conceptualisation of gender, women offered a non-unified, differentiated, hence a multiple category; as an axis of social signification and analysis, gender in isolation was, at least in theory, rejected.

But the recognition of intra-axis differences in itself and even the introduction of other axes into a multi-axes framework do not necessarily lead to intersectional analysis. The tendency to understand gender and race as *parallel* axes in which boxes are ticked (Bowleg, 2008), said to co-exist but are not intertwined, leads to a separate approach of axes as independent. In this framework, the lives of women of colour are located at “mutually exclusive terrains” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1240-1241). At most, their individual (or group specific) experiences would be an *additive* or *accumulative* ‘sum’ of their separate categorical belongings. Intersectional theory, in turn, served to “reject the ‘single-axis framework’”, to “subvert race/gender binaries” (Nash, 2008, pp. 2-3); it offered a perspective to problematise the multiple and *mutually influential* oppressions and subsequent *specific* reality that black and ethnic minority women live. This is not just ‘specific’ because black women experience “multiple jeopardy” (King, 1988), as indicated before; it is specific because the multiplicity of this jeopardy is not additive nor accumulative⁵.

Intersectional Theory

In response to the absence of an adequate *analytic tool*, i.e. a multi-axis framework that would problematise parallel and additive or accumulate approaches (as shown below in Table 1), Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term *intersectionality*. This

⁴ In this article I will use ‘black women’, ‘black and ethnic minority women’ and ‘women of colour’ interchangeably in reference to the variety in racial self-identification in the countries (Brazil, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and the United States) in which this article is academically grounded.

⁵ See for a discussion on the methodology of intersectionality for example Bowleg (2008) and McCall’s (2005) analysis.

responded to a void in feminist and race critical (legal) theory leading to the ‘theoretical erasure’ of black women through “single-axis analysis” and offered a framework through which the “*multidimensionality* of Black women’s experience” could be understood. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139, emphasis mine). Intersectionality, then, “predominantly aims to reveal the unilateral power of social representations, e.g. the detrimental symbolic and material consequences for those groups whose lives are situated at the crossroads of different identities.” (Saharso 2002, p. 22 in Prins, 2006, p. 280) In other words, intersectionality is “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2), through “interlinking grids of differential positionings” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199), which construct “relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771) Not only are race and gender, racism and sexism intrinsically intertwined, they are also intrinsically different. They have different outcomes, separately *and* in their junction (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140; King, 1988, p. 45; Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). Against the compartmentalisation of race/racism and gender/sexism, this *intersectional* approach is what King (1988, p. 47) designated as the *multiplicative* relationship of axes; the synergetic junction where axes are mutually influential and create a *new* location where black women(’s lives) can be comprehended, in Lorde’s (1984, pp. 120-121) words, as a ‘meaningful whole’. The different approaches in a multi-axes framework, including (multiplicative) intersectionality, could be summarised as follows:

relation axes	multi-axes outcome
<i>parallel</i>	gender/sexism race/racism
<i>additive / accumulative</i>	gender/sexism + race/racism = experiences of black women
<i>multiplicative (intersectionality)</i>	gender/sexism x race/racism = experiences of black women

Table 1: Approaches in multi-axes framework

Intersectional theory, then, has been “devoted to understanding the effects of race, class, and gender on women’s identities, experiences, and struggles for empowerment. It has been especially concerned,” continues Davis (2008, p. 71), “with the marginalization of poor women and women of colour within white, Western feminist theory. (...) [T]he focus shifted to how race, class and gender interact in the social and material realities of women’s lives to produce and transform relations of power.” In this sense, intersectionality has been a theoretical and a political project; the recognition of these new locations was aimed at centring “the experiences of subjects whose voices have been ignored” and, subsequently, at the empowerment of black and other marginalised women. The marginalised side of the intersectional subject offered ‘epistemic advantage’ and, as such, a “normative vision of a just society.” (Nash, 2008, pp. 2-3) This romanticised and idealised the marginalised side and fixated “black women’s bodies [as] sites of ‘strength’ and ‘transcendence’ rather than complex spaces of multiple meanings”. This ignored the complexity that intersectionality proposed and, criticised Nash, situated black women in the function as “prototypical intersectional subjects” whose experiences were “used as a theoretical wedge, designed to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional feminist and anti-racist work.” (Ibid, pp. 7-8). Against the origin of intersectional theory, this

reinforced *subordination* in its multiplicity and, doing so, ignored differences and burdened black women and other 'marginalised subjects' with this political project.

"[P]olitical intersectionality," argued Crenshaw, "highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional dis-empowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront." (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252) Forced by their environment, then, black female activists *cannot* act as a 'meaningful whole'. White feminists, to the contrary, are privileged by the *absence* of these conflicts. To limit the theoretical and political project of intersectionality to marginalised subjects is inconsistent with reality, since white women, even in their 'absence', are and also should be part of this project. It essentialises groups of women and, disregarding the origins of intersectional theory that questioned the homogeneity, hegemony and subsequent whiteness of woman, reduces the transformation of power relations to a singular location in subordination. This brings two problems to the forefront concerning feminist activism. First, it "neglects to describe the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect, informing each subject's experiences" (Nash, 2008, p. 12). This is the case for *white* feminist activists and appears to absolve them from responsibility for this transformative project; not only do they not have to split their "political energies" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252), they also have the privilege to ignore the political agenda that troubles their racially advantaged position. Second, this produces a practical problem for the theoretical and political project of their *activism*: how are power relations transformed when the location of activist agency is marked by subordination *and* dominance? Hence, *if* white, feminist activists partake in this project, *how* do they transform? And *what* and *whom* do they transform?

"Everyone," argued Wekker and Lutz (2001, p. 26), "is situated on a number of important axes of social signification." Relations of power imply multiple positions⁶ on these axes – including positions and meanings of domination on other axes. But if relations of power are to be transformed, then *all* voices – including those that jeopardised, dominated and marginalised – should transform and be transformed. Considering that activism and transformation are manifestations of agency, these voices should also be understood as locations where privilege and domination are, agentially, negotiated. As such, it is important to comprehend *intersectional agency* as a location that is simultaneously informed by different manifestations of axes and, therefore, positions in power relations that generate agency as action and, as Juliana demonstrated in the case of whiteness, as *inaction*. Before exploring the complexity of intersectionality, agency and in/action, I would like to elaborate on the position of white feminists.

White Feminists

By taking white feminists as objects of theoretical preoccupation, this article risks to reify the normativity of white women in feminism. This was, *inter alia*, what intersectional theory responded to in the first place but what ends up being reproduced in intersectional analysis; here, the normativity of white women is not reinscribed through negligence of their raciality and race privilege, i.e. where "*woman*" is defined "in terms of

⁶ Additionally, Wekker (1998, p. 48) criticised the intra-axis dichotomy, i.e. the idea that an individual cannot have feelings of belonging to both 'we' *and* 'them', as black *and* white, on *one* axis.

their own experience alone” (Lorde, 1984, p. 117), but by making their racial position problematically ‘special’. I argue that it *is* important to draw attention to the location of white women in an intersectional framework and, to be more specific, approach that as problematic; this location demonstrates tension *in* intersectionality that displays racial hegemony. The following theoretical points motivate this:

1. White women can be objects of research through the description of their lives and experiences. This can occur without any reference to race, for instance, by taking the two axes of social signification (gender and race) as – parallel, additive or multiplicative – *descriptive* denominators. This tends to put white women again at the centre of attention without necessarily critically questioning their role in the entirety of power relations, which goes against the roots of intersectional theory; to reveal the multiple marginalisation and oppression black women suffered and the new location this created by the multiplier effect of these axes. Simultaneously, though, uncovering the conflict that mono-axis analysis – with a singular and homogenising focus on gender – tended to hide, this unfolds the different access to power (resources, etc) black women have in comparison to white women. The problematisation of this intra-axis tension at both the *junction of axes of social signification* and *of positions in power relations* brings to the forefront that white women are intersectionally situated at opposite sides in power relations.

2. This location of contradictory structural forces (i.e. the junction of disadvantage and advantage) that the intersection of gender and race generates cannot be comprehended by a position on either axis nor by the sum of these positions; they are mutually influential, consequently synergetically intertwined . This *new* location is created by the multiplier effect of this junction and demonstrates tension ‘*in*’ this junction; “white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed.” (Collins, 1990, p. 226) This generates the situation where white feminists can be marginalised and *can* marginalise others simultaneously. Intersectionality does not only bring this tension to the forefront but it can also be used as a mode to research this tension.

3. Lastly, in feminist activism white women do not systemically take their specific *intersectional* location into account. It almost goes without saying that the struggle of feminism is directed at both sides of power relations, namely contra the disadvantageous effects of gender inequality for women and contra the structural benefits for men. Recalling the decades long struggle of black and ethnic minority feminists against the multiplicative disadvantageous effects they face, it could have been presumed that the (multiplicative) structural benefits the system of racial inequality grants white women would also be an integral part of *white* feminists’ analysis and activism. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Hence, intersectional analysis that emphasises white feminists’ location as a junction of *positions in power relations* can draw attention to this point and, in addition, be mobilised to uncover tension in the *activist* character of white feminists’ agency and the(ir) objective of social change.

In a context where the intersectional location as a junction of positions in power relations is situated on the same side of the ‘power-axis’ (intersectional marginalisation), there is common ground in which activism is rooted; activist agency is focused on improvement of disadvantaged positions and individual and collective empowerment. But

Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252) pointed already to the practical *parallel* outcomes of ‘political intersectionality’ as “conflicting political agendas” and the “need to split one’s political energies”, a problem that white women do not face. I would like to take this one step further; the absence of this problem *in itself* can be a manifestation of the intersectional position of white feminists and relates to their positions on the axes of gender and race and to their role in white, feminist activists’ struggle for social transformation. This can generate a contradictory manifestation in agency and a conflictive relation to feminism and the, ‘general’, objective of social change; assuming a context where white women ideologically and practically have a consistent activist approach, a situation in which ‘they (try to) practice what they preach’, the route *towards* social justice will be different from a gender than from a racial perspective. From their gender perspective, their activism is focused on individual, collective empowerment and social improvement of their disadvantaged position; as Juliana pointed out, from their ‘oppressed position’ they oppose the institution that oppresses (sexism, patriarchy) and men who ‘represent the oppressor’. From their racial perspective, though, there is no disadvantaged position in their own location that should be improved nor could one say that empowerment would lead to social transformation and equal (gendered) race relations; they inhabit the institution that oppresses and ‘represent the oppressor’. This leads to a conflict in how they ideologically construct their position and role in oppression. (see Huijg, 2011)

Then, when their activist *agency* is addressed analytically, another conflict arises. The agency of white feminists is not only incoherent because of the different routes to ‘intersectional social change’, in its interior it is characterised by tension. The gendered and raced agency of white women work *in themselves* as, what could be called, ‘agentic axes’ and, as structuring forces, operate differently and often contradictorily. This is reinforced in the light of feminist activism and the struggle for transformation of power relations; where agency is manifested both and often simultaneously as action *and* inaction. I will come back to these points, but will first explore the differentiation of layers in intersectional analysis.

Layers of Intersectional Analysis

The distinction in intersectionality that I propose here, to emphasise, is merely analytical. According to this distinction (see also Table 2 below) I suggest that one can call *layer 1* the junction of axes. This ‘moment of intersection’ results in the location of *layer 2*, which, then, is the junction of the manifestations on these axes. Following the aforementioned differentiation between intersectionality as axes of social signification *and* as axes of power relations, I propose another layer; *layer 3* is the junction of positions that *layer 2* generates in power relations. The new – multiplicative – location where black women can be a ‘meaningful whole’, *is* empirically a *whole* position – but the axes can work in separate and even contradictory ways (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). If this is analysed according to this schema, one can distinguish in *layer 1* ‘gender x race’ and in *layer 2* ‘woman x black’. As multiple “negative intersections” (Hancock in Verloo, 2009, p. 9), these layers coherently appear to coincide in *layer 3*: ‘disadvantaged, marginalised (etc) x disadvantaged, marginalised (etc)’.

	Layer 1 junction of axes	Layer 2 manifestation of axes	Layer 3 positions in power relations
junction	axis 1 x axis 2	manifestation of axis 1 x manifestation of axis 2	manifestation of axis 1 as a pos. in power relations x manifestation of axis 2 as a pos. in power relations
black women	gender x race	female x black	disadvantage (etc) x disadvantage (etc)

Table 2: Layers of intersectional analysis: *black women*

White women, see Table 3 (below), share layer 1 with black women. As discussed in the previous sections, the manifestations on these axes are different in layer 2. This becomes significant in terms of a political project *and* its theoretical and empirical complexity, when this is analysed in layer 3; The location of white women is categorically marked by, first, disadvantage on the axis of gender (layer 1) and its manifestation as female (layer 2) and, second, by advantage on the axis of race (layer 1) and its manifestation as white (layer3). This might be a ‘new’ location but surely is *not* a coherent location. To the contrary, it is tensional and, at least theoretically, contradictory if not oppositional in its interior. The critique on the parallel and additive or accumulative approach of intersectionality which suggests that experiences of people of colour “occur on mutually exclusive terrains” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1240-1241) on *axes of social signification*, could now be applied to the experiences of white women on *axes of power relations*. This brings about a conceptual problem in theorising intersectionality; if white

women intersectionally ‘define and confine interests’ (Ibid, p. 1252) from their racial, white, axis and at the same time (potentially) ‘produce and transform power relations’ from their gendered, female, axis, how do they do that at the same time? How do their defining and confining side, as intersectional manifestations, and their productive and transformative side, as agentic manifestations, function in the same moment? How do we have to understand their intersectional (here gender x race, female x white) position as multiplicative, when these interlinking grids hold disadvantage *and* advantage, are marginalised *and* normative – and, consequently, seem incompatible? How can they be a ‘meaningful whole’ when their intersectional status works, from within, in opposition, but is, simultaneously, mutually influential?

	Layer 1 junction of axes	Layer 2 manifestation of axes	Layer 3 positions in power relations
white women	gender x race	female x white	disadvantage (etc) x advantage (etc)

Table 3: Layers of intersectional analysis: *white women*

Verloo⁷ (2009, p.9) underscores the need to research ‘people who in terms of power take opposite positions in the various dimensions of inequality’. She draws attention to the possibility that an advantageous position on one axis (for example race/white) can compensate or neutralise a disadvantageous position on another axis (as gender/female), and that tables can even be turned so that a disadvantage becomes an advantage. An issue I would like to propose is related to Verloo’s point, but with a significant alteration. Initially, I discussed layer 3 as another ‘step’ in intersectional analysis through which it was related to and followed layer 2 and layer 1. On top of this, I propose now to complicate their relation and argue that layer 3 is not only distinctive but can be analytically separated from layer 2 and, subsequently, layer 1; thus, intersectionality understood as the junction of axes of social signification is different from, though intertwined with, intersectionality as the junction of positions in power relations. Even though people, and certainly not black or even white women, are not necessarily approached or even understood as ‘meaningful wholes’, in the material sense

⁷ In addition to intersectionality, Verloo (2009) introduces the concept of interference. Interference could be visualised as waves of systems of social inequality that (partially or temporarily) influence each other and might or might not coincide.

anyone *is* a ‘whole’ – after all can we imagine one leg to be raced, the other gendered – as if they were ‘mutually exclusive terrains’? Meaningful and unified or not, at the end, empirically one cannot be split into parts, categories, be it axes; the separation of axes, that is dissociating ‘what happens in/as race’ from ‘what happens in/as gender’, is, again, an analytical exercise. As an analytical approach, then, I argue that the dissociation of layer 3 from its relation to layer 1 and 2 brings tension to the forefront in the intersectionality of – white, feminist activists – agency and contributes to the understanding of *intersectional* agency.

Intersectional Agency

Traditionally, agency, much like intersectionality, has functioned in feminism as a concept to understand “struggles for empowerment” (Davis, 2008, p. 71). If agency, though, is limited to empowerment because intersectionality is limited to the ‘jeopardised, dominated and marginalised subjects’, then the “production and transformation of relations of power” (Ibid) can only be researched from the location of those with disadvantaged access to power. As a theoretical (be it methodological or epistemological) framework, I argue, intersectional theory facilitates the problematisation of *all* positions – experiences and manifestations – on axes of social signification and, as such, positions in power relations. In the previous section I discussed that intersectionality should be differentiated in layers of analysis with the purpose of, *inter alia*, researching intersectional agency. Before elaborating on that point, I would like to explore the concepts of agency and action – acknowledging that a (tentative) definition is not in the scope of this article.

Following Alexander (1992) and Campbell (2009), I argue that agency cannot be conflated with action; agency and action are different phenomena of the individual and social world. Hence, I recognise the individual as more than social and, though on other grounds, agree with Chalari (2009) that the individual is constituted of an internal and external world and, respectively, acts via *intra*-action and via action or *inter*-action. Action, argued Alexander (1992, p. 8), could be approached as “the movement of a person through time and space”, though it is much more and much less than agency. Agency, then, is associated with purposefulness (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, p. 469; Sztompka, 1993, p. 200) and/or intentional behaviour (Barnes, 2000, p. 10; Mouzelis, 2008, p. 36), with reflexivity, consciousness and awareness (Archer, 2003; Barnes, 2000, p. 10) and, most importantly, with empowerment and transformation (Dugan & Reger, 2006, pp. 469-470; Sztompka, 1993, pp. 37-40, 200). This resonates with the social transformative character and objective of feminist activism. Albeit little consensus on what agency actually ‘is’ or how it operates, with some agreement agency could be understood as the (individual, social) capacity or “ability to accomplish action” (Campbell, 2009, p. 410). Taking into account the explorative character here in the conceptualisation of agency, I would like to suggest that there is, at least, an element of ‘choice’, i.e. an “option of doing otherwise” (Ibid, p. 414); an agentic moment⁸ when and

⁸ An agentic *moment* resonates with the idea of ‘choice’ and the simultaneity of intersectionality, but also alludes to a monolithic and causal idea of agency that lacks the complexity that I propose. Both *context* and *process* enable to think agency in a dynamic and multidimensional way, but, in turn, confuse the idea of ‘choice’. For now, I will use ‘agentic moment’.

where agency is mobilised and exercised by the individual; when action becomes agentic and the actor an agent.

First (see Table 4), this suggests that agency is not always mobilised and, consequently, exercised and manifested. And, contra the conflation of agency with action, this can imply that even when there is action, this action might not always be agentic; when there is no *agentic moment* that caused the individual to perform this action. Think for example of a feminist individual who lets a pie fall on the tie of an anti-abortion politician not because she intended or desired so, without having made the choice to do so (*even* when intended in the past), but because someone else pushed her. There was no agentic moment, no agency that caused her action, but there was action; this could be considered non-agentic action.

Second, this raises the question what happens when agency *is* mobilised. If the feminist individual chooses to let the pie fall (she could have done otherwise, namely *not* let the pie fall), and subsequently she does so, we can identify her action as agentic. Since agency cannot be *equated* with action, we can assume that not each manifestation of agency is action. I argue that we have to consider the possibility that some manifestations of agency are *not* action. Think of the same feminist individual. She wants to throw this pie to the sexist politician, but *decides*, i.e. she made the choice, *not to throw it* (she might have reconsidered that the pie would be nice with coffee afterwards); there was an agentic moment that did *not* generate action. This is what I name **inaction**; a void in action - where action is absent, but where this absent action is a manifestation of agency, what I call **agentic inaction**. In a Table, this looks as follows:

agency \ action	<i>present</i>	<i>absent</i>
<i>present</i>	1. agentic action	2. agentic inaction
<i>absent</i>	3. non-agentic action	4. non-agentic non-action

Table 4: agency *x* action

Without having offered an exact or infinite definition of either agency or in/action, let's, for the sake of the argument, assume that we agree more or less that all exist as outlined. When talking about *intersectional* agency, I will now argue that specifically *inaction* is central to understand its complexity and internally tensional relation.

Feminism aims at social transformation in the field of gender relations, gender discrimination and inequality and, on a more systemic level, sexism and patriarchy. Whichever way you define agency, taking action by changing yourself and/or your environment forms the basis of feminist activism; without action there will be no social transformation. Speaking, as an active manifestation of agency, might modify gender relations in a setting where traditional behaviour for women is silence, which, subsequently, can have an emancipatory effect on their disadvantaged gender position and gendered agency. In an interracial context, where there is a history of the silencing of feminists of colour, the act of speaking can perpetuate racial dominance and confirm the advantaged racial position and raced agency of white feminists. When this is crosscut

with the understanding of layer 3 of intersectionality, it can be argued that silence, as an *inactive* manifestation of agency, can work contrarily and can unsettle their advantaged racial, white, position and, subsequently, have a transformative effect on race relations by challenging the dominance of whiteness. But, contradictorily, this can also *confirm* its privilege and normativity by the absence of protest.

To illustrate this point, I would like to give an example of a feminist workshop on racial group dynamics. By discussing the dynamics of the groups' race relations, the individual participants are compelled to mobilise their agency via intra-action in the form of reflexive deliberation and, as such, racial conscientisation; it could be argued that through the confrontation with *collective* race relations, one needs to, at least individually and – at least – internally, reflect upon one's raciality. This setting, then, creates the prerequisites for external agency – be it via action or inaction. The fact that agency can be externalised into (inter-)action or can be filtered out into an external 'void' (inaction), demonstrates, as previously suggested, that internal and external manifestations of agency can contrast. This contrast becomes more complex when it is taken into account that, externally, agency can be manifested in various ways (as speech and praxis). If one of the white, young, feminist activists in the group is confronted with her racial identity and position inside and outside the group, which generates intra-action (reflexive deliberation), she can respond in various ways. In a workshop on collective racial dynamics, it can be expected that, at some moment, the racial agency of the white members will be problematised. This could include critique on (racial) dynamics in the group that lead to the marginalisation of black and ethnic minority activists and, generally, of racial issues as feminist. This critique might also address the dominant and privileged position of white, young feminist activists in the group and, generally, in the feminist movement which leads to the maintenance of the normativity of whiteness – for example, as argued, via silence or invisibility (i.e. via inaction). The white, young, feminist activist can internally consider these racial issues and is evoked to consider herself on the axis of race and in the racial dynamic of the group. In consequence, it would not be uncommon if white young, feminist activists feel the need to defend themselves 'against' these claims. Even though the 'progressive or transformative' character of their racial agency could be questioned, in their defence they *do* act agentially. The previously mentioned activist, then, has a choice to respond. She can respond via action or via inaction; she can withdraw her participation and *not* speak out, be silent. Since the dominance of whiteness can be manifested via the exorbitant occupation of space and time in interracial dynamics, for example via the hegemonisation of vocal racial interaction, silence can be an agentic attempt to break with a specific interracial dynamic and situate oneself differently in whiteness. On the same note, this silence can be agentic via the omission of action, by avoiding involvement, and, as such, inscribing the normativity of whiteness and its privilege that is characterised by the lack of need to speak out and up and problematised by one's categorical racial advantage. In both cases it is external inaction, in both cases this inaction is agentic, but their intention and purpose – and transformative potential – is radically different. The position of white feminists can be reinforced on layer 3 by exercising *inaction* as a manifestation of racial agency, which is, in turn, characteristic of its position in layer 3; normativity, dominance and systemic advantage can be secured via non-interference – via inaction. This questions whether action can also have an adverse effect on social transformation and whether

action is always the route to social change? This, finally, leads to the question what the role of *inaction* is in intersectional agency where layer 3 is marked by oppositional positions.

Final Considerations

From an agentic perspective, intersectionality brings about a tensional position where young, white feminists do not obviously act as whole. Using the examples of the axes race, gender and, at the end, of age/generation and social-political commitment, it was shown that intersectionality cannot solely be approached via intersectionality as the junction of axes of social signification. Looking at intersectionality as different layers shows that the manifestations of these axes can work contradictorily when they are *also* understood as manifestations of relations of power. This (manifestations of axes in power relations), what I have called layer 3, uncovers the internal – apparent – contradiction in the intersectional location that some people, as white women, occupy, in which they are both advantaged and disadvantaged (etc) at the same time, at the same ‘place’. This raises the question how these manifestations in layer 3 are mutually influential and, subsequently, whether and how young, white feminist activists can, synergetically, *act* as a 'meaningful whole' in/from this location. Additionally, the idea of action brings about apparent contradictions when it becomes clear that agency can be exercised both via action and via inaction. Stereotypically, the aforementioned manifestations of social significations/power relations lean towards action and/or inaction. Both the axes and agency can work, actively and inactively, but they can, again, do so in apparently opposite modes. This theoretical exploration demonstrates that in the case of young, white, feminist activists, intersectionality – specifically looking at race, gender (age/generation and social-political commitment) – and agency do not clearly operate as a whole. But it is exactly this *intersectional* tension between axes (race, gender, etc) and agency (action, inaction) that can expose *how* they, on apparently internally opposite positions, *do* act from this 'new location' – as meaningfully whole or not.

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