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## **What does it mean to 'decolonise'<sup>1</sup> gender studies?: Theorising the decolonial capacities of gender performativity and intersectionality**

By Julianne McShane<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper argues for an understanding of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as decolonial methodologies, alternative epistemologies, and forms of political praxis within gender studies, specifically focusing on the field's institutionalisation within Western universities, given both their historic complicity in naturalising imperialist ideas and my own lived experience studying within them. I argue that gender performativity and intersectionality act as decolonial methodologies by revealing the respective erasures of constructedness and situatedness within certain dysconscious, imperialist conceptions of 'gender' grounded in Whiteness, as well as how these erasures remain otherwise hidden and/or naturalised (to some). By putting forth alternative ways of 'doing' and 'knowing' 'gender' — centered on liberatory conceptions of identity and identity politics — gender performativity and intersectionality also function as alternative epistemologies and forms of political praxis, I argue. In doing so, they facilitate centering the field's praxical potentials (and indeed, obligations) to train thinkers to confront material inequities — 'gender'-based and otherwise — in Western institutionalised understandings of what 'gender studies' should strive to be and do, I conclude.

*Keywords:* gender performativity, intersectionality, decolonial border thinking, archaeological methodology, dysconsciousness, cultural archive, Western university, gender studies

### **Introduction: Performativity, intersectionality, and 'decolonisation'**

Over the past three decades, Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw have arguably become among gender studies' most well-known contemporary American scholars. Butler's (1988, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009) concept of gender performativity and Crenshaw's (1989, 1991, 2016, 2019) concept of intersectionality have transcended the boundaries of both the field of gender studies and the academy itself. Both academics have become well-known figures beyond the academy, and their concepts have become buzzwords that are just as easily used in the American media as in academic literature. As Butler and Crenshaw's stars have risen, so have movements gained

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<sup>1</sup> Following an awareness of the particular histories and the high stakes — the repatriation of stolen Indigenous lands and lives — inherent in discussions of what constitutes processes of 'decolonisation' (Tuck and Yang, 2012), I stylise the term in quotation marks in this paper when I use it as a verb or noun, in order to distinguish my symbolic use of it from its literal and historical one. I use the terms 'decoloniality' and 'decolonial,' without quotes, to refer to the characteristics that constitute 'decolonisation,' as outlined in decolonial theory, the body of work written, in part, by some of the decolonial theorists whose work I invoke throughout this paper

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steam to ‘decolonise’ the Western university. The most well-known among them<sup>3</sup> have relied on calls to both recognise and resist the colonial histories inherent within Western universities, and the myriad ways they have endured, through iconography, curricula, and representational politics (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). Despite the enduring popularity of both Butler and Crenshaw and their works, and the rise of pursuits to ‘decolonise’ the university (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018), the decolonial capacities of gender performativity and intersectionality — that is, their abilities to disrupt imperialist notions of ‘gender’ within the field of gender studies, and dominant colonial epistemologies and methodologies within the university more broadly — have heretofore gone comparatively under examined.

Decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo (2011) writes that “...decoloniality focuses on changing the terms of the conversation and not only its content” (p. 133). In this paper, I argue that Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality function as what Mignolo (with Tlostanova, 2006, 2011) characterises as decolonial border thinking concepts, by contributing to changing both the terms and the content of conversations around ‘gender’ as an assumed stable category of identity and analysis. It is of particular concern, I argue, that ‘decolonising’ gender studies seeks to both make visible and disrupt a particular imperialist conception of ‘gender’ (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016) that has historically proliferated in Western gender studies programs (due in part to the dominance of White women within them), given the ways these conceptions have served to reify and naturalise a particular — White, heterosexual, cisgender, classist, ableist — notion of ‘womanhood,’ while simultaneously erasing, excluding, and marginalising the representations, lived experiences, and knowledge production of Indigenous women, Black women, other women of color, and women of the Global South (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Giddings, 1985; Collins, 1989; Lim, 1998; Lee, 2000; Duncan, 2002; May, 2002; Pande, 2015; Wekker, 2016).

I begin in the next section by outlining the broad strokes and intellectual histories of Butler’s and Crenshaw’s theories before analysing how they map to three key referents that Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018) outline as characteristic of decoloniality and invoking the concepts of decolonial border thinking (Mignolo, 2011), archaeological methodologies (Oyewùmí, 1997), and dysconsciousness (King, 1991). I argue that, as decolonial border thinking concepts (Mignolo, 2011) and archaeological methodologies (Oyewùmí, 1997), gender performativity and intersectionality reveal the dysconsciousness (King, 1991) that manifests as both the respective erasures of the constructedness and situatedness within certain imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016) and how these erasures remain otherwise hidden (at least, to some). In the final section, I argue that gender performativity and intersectionality also function as alternative epistemologies and forms of political praxis (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018), by putting forth alternative ways of ‘doing’ and ‘knowing’ ‘gender’ centered on liberatory conceptions of identity and identity politics, respectively (Butler, 1988; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In doing so, I argue, they fulfill Lugones’ (2010) conception of ‘decolonising’ ‘gender’ as a “praxical task,” by enacting a “critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social” (p. 746). I make this argument through an analysis of the works of Wekker (2016) and Oyewùmí (1997), additionally analysing how their works reveal the roles of the cultural archive (Said, 1993; Stoler, 2009) in constructing how imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ become naturalised. I conclude by arguing for the praxical potentials, and urgencies, of

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<sup>3</sup> In the UK, these include Rhodes Must Fall at Oxford and the UK National Union of Students’ ‘Why Is My Curriculum So White?’ and #LiberateMyDegree (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancıoğlu, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

employing Butler's and Crenshaw's works as pathways towards decoloniality within Western universities' constructions of 'gender studies.'

It is worth noting that I conduct this exploration and analysis as a cisgender White woman who has been educated in Western institutions of higher education — in the U.S. and in France, where I undertook my undergraduate studies, the U.K., where I completed graduate work in gender studies, and the Netherlands, where I completed a month-long academic fellowship. My situatedness shapes —and, inevitably, limits —how I approach thinking about 'decolonising' gender studies. In this paper, my analysis is specifically geared towards ways that gender studies programs within the Western university, and those within them, can work to 'decolonise' their own programs, given that these are the environments in which I have lived experience as a student, which informs the analysis herein.

### **On delinking from dysconsciousness, and paths to decoloniality within gender studies**

#### *Butler's gender performativity*

Butler developed the concept of gender performativity in 1988, establishing 'gender' as "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment" that is achieved through "a stylized repetition of acts" and "the stylization of the body" (p. 519). According to Butler (1988), these acts and stylizations — "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds" — constitute not only the identity of the individual "actor," but also the promise they proffer: "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519). Butler (1988) also argues that theorists of 'gender' conceal its very construction and presume its "necessity and naturalness" (p. 522) by continually articulating it, uncritically, through language — another method through which she argues the repetition of actions that produce effects comes to constitute 'gender.' She argues that this continual reproduction of 'gendered' identity contributes to both the social organization of bodies into 'gender' binaries, and an imposed assumption of heteronormativity, arguing that this uncritical repetition serves to posit such categorical organizations as a "natural configuration" (ibid, p. 524). But in examining the distinct, but related, subversive performances of 'gender' through the lenses of drag queens and transgender people, Butler (1988) shows both its fundamental un-'naturalness', as well as the performativity that constitutes it.

As philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999) notes in her critique of Butler, the philosopher and gender theorist was not the first to propose a conception of 'gender' as 'unnatural'; throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various theorists of politics, biology, and 'gender' —including John Stuart Mill, Andrea Dworkin, Nancy Chodorow, Anne Fausto Sterling, and Susan Moller Okin — made similar 'gender'-based social constructionist arguments. Butler also acknowledges that she builds on the work of philosophers who consider the performativity of language; she claims her conception of performativity relies most notably on J. L. Austin's (1962) concept of 'performative utterances,' used to describe speech acts that both describe and have the power to change realities of the social world (Nussbaum, 1999<sup>4</sup>). Other scholars have subsequently taken up the concept, applying it and its foundational principles to fields ranging from theories of masculinities to organizational psychology.<sup>5</sup>

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4 It is worth acknowledging that Nussbaum (1999) takes issue with the validity and coherence of Butler's claim of Austin's (1962) influence.

5 See, for example: Connell (1993) on masculinities; Hancock and Tyler (2007), Tyler and Cohen (2010) on organizational psychology.

But, as Nussbaum (1999) notes (albeit derisively), Butler (1988) distinguishes herself from her predecessors in particular by positioning ‘gender’s’ constructivist, performative roots as paths to freedom, which engender possibilities for its parody, through “subversive performances of various kinds” (p. 531). In Nussbaum’s (1999) assessment, this capacity for parody underlying Butler’s theory of gender performativity also allows for —as Butler titled her 2004 book — ‘undoing gender’; Nussbaum (ibid) writes, “by carrying out these performances in a slightly different manner, a parodic manner, we can perhaps unmake them just a little.” And here, I argue, is where gender performativity’s decolonial capacities lie: in the recognition of both the constructed nature of ‘gender’ and alternative ways of being, beyond the ‘gender binary.’

### *Crenshaw’s intersectionality*

A year after Butler (1988) introduced her conception of gender performativity, Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality in a paper that considers how antidiscrimination doctrine in the law, feminist theory, and antiracist politics exclude the unique positionality —and, therefore, the lived experiences and emanant knowledge production — of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) relies on the metaphor of a traffic intersection to establish the fallibility of what she calls the “single-axis framework” of discriminatory thought, which “treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139). Crenshaw (1989) centers Black women in her analysis to show how their unique experiences and challenges emerge from the dual forces of sexism and racism, whose manifestations she claims often go unseen by Black men and White women in particular, despite the fact that they are ostensibly members of the same race and gender, respectively. She examines how the failure to recognize this intersection has erased and distorted the experiences of Black women in the courts, in feminist theory, and in antiracist politics (ibid).

In putting forth the framework of intersectionality, Crenshaw (ibid) aims to both identify and resist what she later articulates as “antiracism’s essentializing Blackness and feminism’s essentializing womanhood” (1991, p. 1298). Crenshaw (1989) argues for intersectionality’s urgency as a new framework of analysis that considers multiple categories of identity — race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability among them — in part to fully recognize the unique challenges and experiences facing Black women. She posits the possibilities of this framework to contribute to the liberation of Black women from these aforementioned discriminatory constraints, to broader Black liberatory political projects, and to countering the complacency that upholds dominant, single-axis modes of discriminatory thought more generally (Crenshaw, 1989). Part of intersectionality’s decolonial promise, I argue, lies in its ability to identify erasures of race (and other categories of identity) within certain conceptions of ‘gender,’ as well as alternative frameworks of knowing ‘gender,’ beyond the aforementioned single-axis framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Crenshaw was not the first scholar to consider the multiple forms of discrimination that Black women experience simultaneously (Giddings, 1985; Collins, 1989; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984), but she was the first to articulate a new framework for recognizing these multiple forms of discrimination. Her work, indeed, builds on the legacy of Black women scholars who have similarly articulated the challenges Black women face as a result of their unique positionality; in Crenshaw’s (1989) first paper on intersectionality, she recalls the efforts and influence by 19th century Black feminists Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper to consider the multiple forms of

discrimination Black women experience, along with 20<sup>th</sup> century Black feminist scholars bell hooks (1981), Angela Davis (1983), and Paula Giddings (1985), among others.<sup>6</sup>

In the years since Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term, she and other scholars have continued to expand upon her landmark work. Crenshaw (1991) followed up on her aforementioned paper in another well-known work two years later, in which she both narrowed the focus and broadened the scope of her original inquiry, by applying an intersectional framework to an analysis of the realities and representations of violence perpetrated against Black, Asian, Latina, and immigrant women; specifically, she considers the intersection of gender and race in the structural, political, and representational aspects of domestic violence and rape as these women of color experience them (ibid). She uses this analysis to both locate the concept of ‘identity politics’ at the intersections of various categories of identity, and argue for the political possibility and urgency of recognizing these identity groups as “political coalitions waiting to be formed” (ibid, p. 1299).

More recently, Crenshaw and other scholars have jointly examined the roles of racial hierarchies and colonialism in academic disciplines including gender studies (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, Harris, HoSang, Lipsitz, 2019), as well as the promise and possibility of congealing debates about the theoretical, methodological, and praxical scopes of intersectionality into a proper field of intersectionality studies (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 2013). Gloria Wekker (2004, 2016) and Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2019) are among the most prominent scholars who have built on Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality over the years.

### *Situating performativity and intersectionality as archaeological methodologies that bring dysconsciousness to light*

Gender performativity and intersectionality may appear as incompatible, given that gender performativity posits ‘gender’ as a constructed, performative state, and that intersectionality is an analytical framework attuned to the real-world consequences of how the category of ‘gender’ interacts with other categories of identity. But instead, they ground each other, as both epistemologies and methodologies. Butler (1988) implicitly recognizes the need for an intersectional approach to any ‘gender’-based analysis, by acknowledging the danger for feminists of assuming a stable category of ‘women’ that “may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women” (p. 523). And Crenshaw (1991) acknowledges the validity of poststructuralist conceptions of ‘gender’ as a socially constructed state of being, while also urging for the necessity of recognizing and centering the real-world implications of identity in any intersectional analysis, characterising her project as one “...that presumes that categories [of identity] have meanings and consequences” (p. 1297).

Gender performativity and intersectionality thus resist rigid conceptions of ‘gender,’ I argue, in part by revealing the implicit, imperialist assumptions of stability that underlie certain conceptions of the category of ‘woman’ as a site of both identity and analysis, respectively: Butler’s (1998) work relies upon her rejection of the conception of ‘gender’ as a ‘natural’ phenomenon whose ‘naturalness’ is ‘proven’ by what she characterises as its performance, and Crenshaw (1989, 1991) rejects the single-axis framework of analysis that posits that ‘gender’ can be analysed — or indeed, exists — independently of race. The concepts of gender performativity and intersectionality, I argue, act as tools that both locate and reveal two interlinked problems:

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<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw does not cite Audre Lorde (1984) directly in her work, but I do so here to acknowledge her foundational contributions to feminist consciousness.

the (respective) erasures of the constructedness and situatedness of ‘gender,’ and the ways in which imperialism naturalises both these erasures and the imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ that come to replace them (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2011).

By identifying, disrupting, and ultimately resisting imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016), I argue that gender performativity and intersectionality facilitate decoloniality, in ways that map to three key referents that Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018) outline. In Bhambra’s (2014) conception, ‘decolonisation’ recognizes and grounds the roles of colonialism, empire, and racism as “key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context in which their role has been systemically effaced from view” (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018, p. 2). Throughout this paper, I invoke Mignolo’s (2011) work on border thinking, Oyewùmí’s (1997) articulation of an archaeological methodology, and King’s (1991) work on dysconsciousness to theorise the components of this process of excavation and the significance of each step, analysing how (I argue) gender performativity and intersectionality facilitate them. And in two additional conceptions of decoloniality articulated by various decolonial theorists (Smith, 2012; Wilder, 2015; Allen, 2016; Tilley, 2017) who the previous group of authors cite, decolonial methodologies ground themselves in both alternative epistemologies and forms of political praxis (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018) — two other key ways I argue gender performativity and intersectionality facilitate decoloniality.

Here, I invoke Mignolo’s (2011) interpretation of border thinking — a concept originally articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) — along with Oyewùmí’s (1997) archaeological methodology and King’s (1991) dysconsciousness, to locate the imperialist epistemologies I argue gender performativity and intersectionality make visible and resist; in the next section, I examine in more detail *how* they function as decolonial methodologies within gender studies scholarship, and in doing so, what they offer the field as alternative epistemologies that facilitate forms of political praxis.

Mignolo (2011) establishes border thinking as “the epistemic singularity of any decolonial project” (p. 131); it is, he writes, “the epistemology of the exteriority” (with Tlostanova, 2006, p. 206). Border thinking is a mode of thought consisting of knowledge produced from alternative epistemological traditions — those that exist outside of normative Western ones (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Mignolo, 2011; Mayblin, n.d.). It is an epistemology that is not only grounded in, but also derives from, one’s lived experience inhabiting ‘borders’ — those political, cultural, epistemic, and geographic spaces that are “structured by the imperial and colonial differences” (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, p. 208). Decolonial border thinking emerges from what Mignolo calls the “anti-imperial epistemic responses to the colonial difference” (ibid); this thinking, then, is distinguished by both the recognition and the resistance of rankings, categorizations, and designations of both people and ideas as ‘Other,’ and of these political, cultural, and epistemic ‘differences’ — which, he notes, are nothing more than designations constructed and re-inscribed by imperialist hegemonic discourses originating in the West (with Tlostanova, 2006; 2011). In addition to shifting both the content and paradigms of thought, decolonial border thinking also shifts the reason for producing knowledge from accumulation to liberatory praxis, Mignolo writes (with Tlostanova, 2006) — more on this in the next section. Conceptualised as forms of decolonial border thinking, gender performativity and intersectionality join a body of decolonial work that aims to change the form, content, and ‘goals’ of the knowledge that comes to be legitimised within the Western university — a project that is, therefore, inherently political, in part due to the historic complicity of the

Western university with naturalising imperialist ideas (Mohanty, 1984; Mignolo with Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2011; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018).

If decolonial border thinking characterises what gender performativity and intersectionality are, as I theorize, then Oyewùmí's (1997) articulation of an archaeological methodology and King's (1991) dysconsciousness point to what they do, I argue: locate and illuminate the existence and content of imperialist epistemologies that have been tacitly and uncritically accepted among some — in part by their crafting of imperialist hegemonic discourses used to both reinscribe their own social and political power and ensure the continued oppression of others' (Mohanty, 1984; Mignolo with Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2011; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). In her work on what she characterises as the British colonial imposition of the gender system on the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria, Oyewùmí (1997) calls the methodology she employed to do her research understanding the epistemological bases of both Yorùbá and Western cultures as an archaeological methodology, characterized by “revealing the most basic but hidden assumptions, making explicit what has been merely implicit, and unearthing the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying research concepts and theories” (p. ix).<sup>7</sup> Both Crenshaw and Butler have acknowledged the ways in which their work functions as archaeological methodologies, by unearthing the erasures of the situatedness and constructedness of ‘gender,’ respectively, and how these erasures remain otherwise hidden (at least, to some). For Crenshaw (1989), it is the forces of sexist and racist forces of dysconsciousness (King, 1991) that centers Black men's and White women's experiences in discussions of race and gender, respectively, while excluding the lived experiences of Black women — and naturalising it: “While it could be argued that this failure represents an absence of political will to include Black women [in anti-discrimination law], I believe that it reflects an uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination,” she writes (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150). To Butler (1988), ‘gender’ is not only defined by its performativity, but also by the work it does to conceal that constructedness: she calls the ‘nature’ of ‘gender’ “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment” (p. 520), and “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (p. 522). She continues: “The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production” (ibid).

This point in particular — on how the pervasive performance of ‘gender’ inscribes it with a widely assumed ‘legitimacy’ (Butler, 1988) — recalls Bhambra's, Gebrial's, and Nişancıoğlu's critiques (2018) of the institution of the Western university as being perceived as endowed with “epistemological authority...as the privileged site of knowledge production” (p. 3). Coupled with Butler's (1988) argument, this critique, I argue, underscores the power that gender studies programs within the Western university have, in both shaping students' ideas of ‘gender’ and reinscribing them as ‘legitimate,’ by virtue of their aforementioned assumed authority within that site (itself both a driving force, and a product of, imperialism) (Mohanty, 1984; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). Just as in Butler's (1988) estimation it is the veneer of ‘credibility’ that obscures the fiction of the ‘gender binary,’ it is, I argue, the false equation of the Western university with inherent epistemological authority that obscures — to some within them, at least

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<sup>7</sup> I include more details in the next section, where it is particularly relevant, on the specific assumptions that Oyewùmí (1997) unearths in her work, and how she brought them to light — as well as the implicit connections to the notion of the cultural archive (Said, 1993; Stoler, 2009; Wekker, 2016).



— the fallibility of imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ that it is, indeed, capable of producing and naturalising: those specifically predicated on Whiteness, cisgenderism, heterosexuality, classism, and ableism (Mohanty, 1984; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). It is the work of archaeological methodologies, like gender performativity and intersectionality, to contribute to ‘decolonising’ by bringing these assumptions above ground and into the light (Oyewùmí, 1997).

But epistemological excavation is only the first step of ‘decolonising.’ The next — as Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018) note — is making visible the content of those tacit epistemic assumptions and making visible the roles and specific characteristics of colonialism, empire, and racism as “key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context in which their role has been systemically effaced from view” (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018, p. 2). I invoke dysconsciousness (King, 1991) to argue for how to understand this part of the process. King (1991) describes dysconsciousness as “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). King (1991) specifically examines the concept of dysconscious racism in education, writing of how her student teachers’ understandings of racial inequalities reflected a dysconscious racism that attempted to justify White privilege and racial inequalities by framing the differences between Black and White children’s life trajectories “as a historically inevitable consequence of slavery or as a result of prejudice and discrimination — without recognizing the structural inequity built into the social order” (p. 138).

Both Butler and Crenshaw explicitly acknowledge the dysconscious forces that they seek to counter through their work (though they don’t use King’s language — likely at least in part because their writing came before hers). For Butler (1988), it is the fiction of ‘gender’ being grounded in a “true gender identity” (p. 528); for Crenshaw (1989), it is the fiction that ‘gender’ exists and can be understood separately from ‘race’ and other categories of identity, which manifests as the “uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination” that contribute to the failures of judicial, feminist, and civil rights thinkers to recognize and foreground “both the unique compoundedness of [Black women’s] situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks” (p. 150). As I show more in the next section, these are, indeed, forms of dysconsciousness (King, 1991) that have historically dominated conceptions of ‘gender’ within the Western university.

But, I argue, the decolonial capabilities of gender performativity and intersectionality emerge in full force in their capacities to not only resist imperialist conceptions of ‘gender,’ but to also create the possibilities of alternative ways of being, knowing, and ‘doing’ ‘gender’ and ‘gender’-based analyses — also known as what Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018) call “alternative epistemologies and forms of political praxis” (p. 2). I now turn now to argue how gender performativity and intersectionality facilitate these two additional key characteristics of decoloniality.

### **‘A praxical task’: Putting gender performativity and intersectionality to decolonial practice in gender studies**

Mignolo, similarly to other decolonial theorists (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2010), rejects the notion of a ‘binary’ that distinguishes theory from practice: of decolonial border thinking, he has said, “I prefer talking about border thinking and doing — for thinking is doing and doing is thinking” (“Interview — Walter D. Mignolo,” 2017). Mignolo (with Tlostanova, 2006) also

resists a conception of knowledge production consistent with imperialism — one whose merits are predicated on consumption and accumulation rather than the spurring of liberatory praxis; he has written, “de-colonization...works towards the empowerment and liberation of different layers... from oppression, and toward the undermining of the assumption upon which imperial power is naturalized, enacted and corrupted” (p. 208). This paradigm shift, Mignolo notes (2011), runs inherently counter to the conditions on which the ‘modern’ university operates, competes, and is judged on the global academic stage, given that “the true goals of institutions of higher education is to compete with other institutions of higher education and move up in the several recognized poles of global ranking” (p. 138). This does not mean decolonial border thinking is an impossible task to carry out from within the university, Mignolo (ibid) writes (though he concedes it may encounter challenges of both funding and enthusiasm); rather, he argues that it emphasises the extent to which the very conception, structure, and purpose of the university pose challenges to the project of decoloniality — making it all the more urgent for the ideas produced inside it to journey beyond its walls (ibid).

Butler and Crenshaw, I argue, have implicitly acknowledged that their ideas are intended to — as Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018) articulate in two points of the aforementioned three-pronged framework — serve as forms of alternative epistemologies meant to spur real-world praxis, specifically centered on liberatory conceptions of identity and identity politics. Butler (1988) writes that the recognition of the performative nature of ‘gender’ creates both the space and terms of recognition for different gender identities, beyond the two that have been naturalised by the notion of the ‘gender binary’; she notes that gender performativity creates “the possibilities of gender transformation... in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style...in its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (p. 520). Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality seeks to facilitate more nuanced conceptions of identity politics to construct stronger collective, liberatory political coalitions and move towards action; she writes that “...the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves in are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed...through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (p. 1299).

Both gender performativity and intersectionality, I argue, seek to fulfill Lugones’ (2010) conception of ‘decolonising’ ‘gender’ as a “praxical task,” by enacting a “critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social” (p. 746). In doing so, I also argue that they help situate gender studies as “a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 334). I turn now to analyse how Wekker (2016) and Oyewùmí (1997) employ intersectionality and gender performativity, respectively, as decolonial epistemologies and methodologies in ways that map to the aforementioned three key referents of decoloniality (Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018).

### *The ‘silent imaginary subject’: How imperialist cultural archives naturalise ‘White womanhood’ and the Western gender system*

The marginalisation and exclusion of women of color as both scholars and ‘gendered subjects’ has endured since the field’s institutionalization in Western universities throughout the 1970s and 80s, when White women dominated the faculty and curricula (Feitz, 2016; Wekker, 2016) and locked out women of color activists from teaching gender studies university courses in

the U.S. in particular (hooks, 2000). Within gender studies programs, this broadly gave rise to something akin to what Mohanty (1984) calls an “ethnocentric universalism” that positions the “authorial subject as the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others” (p. 336), which emerges as a result of coloniality’s domination and suppression of heterogeneity and therefore functions as the bases for colonial projects, she argues. In other words, because White cisgender women have historically dominated Western gender studies university programs — in part due to locking women of color out of them in their earliest days (hooks, 2000; Feitz, 2016; Wekker, 2016) — some of their experiences of White cisgender ‘womanhood’ became the “implicit referent” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 336) for the basis of certain scholarly understandings of who constitutes the ‘default’ ‘gendered subject’ within the field, a positioning that has had enduring effects.<sup>8</sup>

Gloria Wekker (2016) examines how this manifests in gender studies programs in the Netherlands, writing of the “general ethos of avoidance, fear, and displacement around the axis of race/ethnicity in Dutch women’s studies, which is made up largely of White women” (p. 52). She establishes the White Eurocentric woman — the “silent imaginary subject” (ibid, p. 66) — as the one who underlies the Dutch field of gender studies, borne out by the relegation of the considerations of Black women and women of the Global South to ‘ethnic/migration studies’ and ‘development studies’ programs, respectively. She considers the persistence of Dutch gender studies programs as “single-axis” endeavors (ibid, p. 71) — implicitly recalling Crenshaw’s work (1989, 1991) — as evinced by the decades-long failures of White Dutch women to take antiracist feminist stances in both Dutch feminist movements and women’s studies programs.

Wekker’s (2016) work itself, I argue, functions as a form of decolonial border thinking (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Mignolo, 2011), given that it emanates from her own situatedness as an Afro-Surinamese woman (who is, by her own account, something of an ‘outsider’ in the Dutch academy) and her recognition of the tacit imperialism underlying both the structure and content of Dutch gender studies programs. Additionally, I argue, she uses intersectionality as an archaeology methodology (Oyewùmí, 1997) to bring to light both the existence and contents of the Netherlands’ cultural archive (Said, 1993), and to position it as a form of dysconsciousness (King, 1991) governing Dutch gender studies and the academy more broadly (Wekker, 2016). She elucidates the cultural archive (Said, 1993), in Ann Stoler’s conception, as the “repository of memory” (2009, p. 49), which Wekker (2016) theorises shapes thought and feeling, and emerges “in policies, in organizational rules, in popular and sexual cultures, and in commonsense everyday knowledge, and all of this is based on four hundred years of imperial rule” (p. 19). And

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<sup>8</sup> One of the most well-known examples within American scholarship of this uncritical positioning of middle- and upper-class White ‘womanhood’ as ‘default’ is found in the work of Friedan (1963), who famously argued in *The Feminine Mystique* for both a recognition of the domestic sphere as a source of ‘women’s oppression’ and women’s rights to work outside the home as a source of ‘women’s liberation.’ Black feminist theorists including Davis (1981, 1989), Collins (1986, 1989, 1991), and hooks (1981, 1984) subsequently argued for the recognition of the limits of this analysis, by highlighting its focus on middle- and upper-class White women’s experiences. These theorists (Davis, 1981, 1989; hooks, 1981, 1984; Collins, 1986, 1989, 1991) additionally highlight the fact that both enslaved and free Black women in America have been working — both within homes, as domestic workers, and outside of them — for centuries, and how many Black women historically aspired to be able to afford to stay at home as housewives to prove their value in alignment with the dominant conception of ‘White womanhood’ in the U.S., which was valorised for its ties to domesticity, in stark contrast to the “institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood” (hooks, 1981, p. 62). Collins’ (1986, 1989, 1991) conception of Black women domestic workers as ‘outsiders within’ emerges as particularly relevant here, for highlighting the distinct roles that race and class play in the nature and construction of Black women’s ‘standpoints’ and knowledge production more broadly — especially within gender studies.

she theorises that the cultural archive (Said, 1993) manifests similarly to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, as "a way of acting that people have been socialized into, that becomes natural, escaping consciousness" (Wekker, 2016, p. 20). In the Netherlands, Wekker (2016) writes, this cultural archive (Said, 1993) manifests through the country's dominant self-image as an allegedly hospitable, inherently antiracist, egalitarian nation, whose construction of national memory does not confront the sins of its colonial past. It is this self-image, Wekker (2016) argues, that directly contributes to the dysconsciousness (King, 1991) of the severing of gender and race within the Dutch academy; as a result, she argues, Black women remain invisible as both subjects and scholars to many White people (and White women, specifically) in the Dutch academy, and beyond (ibid).

Wekker's (ibid) work, *I argue*, offers an example of how intersectionality can, as a methodology, facilitate a 'praxical' turn towards decoloniality within gender studies, when scholars and students turn an intersectional lens on themselves to examine and excavate the contents of the cultural archive (Said, 1993) that inform their own positionings of 'gender' and the broader cultural contexts in which they exists, and how histories of colonialism impact both of these factors. It also offers proof of the importance of centering the work of women of color, and Black women specifically, within gender studies programs, due in part to their essential "distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 1986, p. S14) emanating from their own lived experiences (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Giddings, 1985; Collins, 1989; Lim, 1998; Lee, 2000; Duncan, 2002; May, 2002; Pande, 2015; Wekker, 2016). As a result of those experiences, scholars like Wekker<sup>9</sup> in particular offer alternative epistemologies that can help praxically facilitate decoloniality within the academy (Mohanty, 1984; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018).

A similarly essential analysis, relevant to gender performativity, is found in the work of Oyewùmí (1997), which I have relied on throughout this paper. In her work on the British colonial imposition of the gender system on the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria, Oyewùmí (1997) employs an archaeological methodology to examine, in part, the biological determinism underlying Western conceptions of 'gender' (Butler, 1998, 1993, 1999, 2004), arguing that this runs counter to the social organization of the Yorùbá people, whose pre-colonisation divisions of social roles did not recognize 'gender' as it was conceived in the West. Hierarchical organisations in the Yorùbá society, Oyewùmí argues, were instead based on "the highly situational nature of Yorùbá social identity" (ibid, p. xiii), dependent in part on factors including age and strength of relationships, rather than power-laden Western constructions of 'gender.' She argues that the imposition of the Western gender system, and the accompanying assumptions of its universality and stability, serve as examples "of Western dominance in the documentation and interpretation of the world, one that is facilitated by the West's global material dominance" (ibid, p. 32); in doing so, I argue, she illuminates the dysconsciousness (King, 1991) that characterises the assumptions of universality and stability inherent in Western imperialist conceptions of 'gender,' and offers an alternative epistemology — one that recognises 'gender' as a constructed, culturally-specific state.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1984; Giddings, 1985; Collins, 1989; Lim, 1998; Lee, 2000; Duncan, 2002; May, 2002; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013; Pande, 2015; Wekker, 2016; Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018.

The work of Oyewùmí (1997) and other scholars<sup>10</sup> whose work centers on the historical realities of the impositions of the Western gender system on Indigenous peoples as products of colonisation offer ‘praxically’-focused examples, I argue, of how Western conceptions of ‘gender’ have historically been complicit with imperialism (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016), naturalised through their repeated performances (Butler, 1988) and the impositions of those performances on those who did not previously perform them the same way. Discussions within gender studies of Butler’s work on gender performativity should take as ‘praxical’ objects of analyses these works — and the works of other Indigenous scholars — and the histories they highlight, I argue. They, along with Wekker’s (2016) work, serve as reminders that gender performativity and intersectionality, among other foundational ideas within gender studies, are not only theoretical; they are also urgently praxical (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016). Conceiving of them — and the field — as such reminds scholars and students of gender studies that the field should aim to train thinkers who can translate the decolonial knowledge they gain within its institutionalised university programs beyond its walls, to confront urgent material inequities, ‘gender’-based and otherwise, that endure and proliferate today (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016).

### **Conclusion: Digging for truths, ‘decolonising’ gender studies**

Of employing archaeological methodologies to expose tacit assumptions, Oyewùmí (1997) writes: “Only when such assumptions are exposed can they be debated and challenged” (p. ix). Her work points to what I argue ‘decolonising’ gender studies should strive for, and why: digging below the surfaces of imperialist assumptions of ‘gender’-based stability — in this case, of the fictions of both White ‘womanhood’ (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) and gender as a ‘natural’ and universal phenomenon (Oyewùmí, 1997; Butler, 1998) — to unearth and shine a light on both the form and content of these ideas in order to change them (Mohanty, 1984; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016). Gender performativity and intersectionality, I argue, function as decolonial methodologies, alternative epistemologies, and forms of political praxis (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, 2018) that are distinctly capable of carrying out these aims, within gender studies and beyond. Given the historic complicity of Western universities and gender studies programs in naturalising imperialist ideas (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Giddings, 1985; Collins, 1989; Lim, 1998; Lee, 2000; Duncan, 2002; May, 2002; Pande, 2015; Wekker, 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, 2018), it is, I argue, Western gender studies programs that are particularly in need of employing gender performativity and intersectionality as decolonial methodologies, alternative epistemologies, and forms of political praxis (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu, 2018) — in the active processes of ‘decolonising’ their curricula, legitimised knowledge production, and understandings of ‘gender studies’ itself.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, on the colonial imposition of the gender system on Native American people, Gunn Allen, 1986/1992; Lugones, 2007, 2010, 2016.

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