Since intersectionality’s emergence\(^1\) two decades ago as a juridical intervention that exposes the violence antidiscrimination law inflicts on black female plaintiffs,\(^2\) intersectionality has become a theory of identity, injury, multiple marginalization, and subjectivity. It has traveled far from law—and often without reference to law—across the humanities and social sciences. Intersectionality is now celebrated as “the primary figure of political completion in US identity knowledge domains,”\(^3\) as “part of the gender studies canon,”\(^4\) as “a new raison d’être for doing feminist theory and analysis,”\(^5\) as “the most cutting-edge approach to the politics of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class,”\(^6\) and as “the most important contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.”\(^7\) This paper explores an era where a form of black feminist outsider knowledge\(^8\) has become comfortably housed within the academy, in spaces like Columbia Law School’s Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies,\(^9\) in myriad academic conferences\(^10\) and journals,\(^11\) and in mission statements where women’s studies departments and programs define themselves by a commitment to “analyses of gender and sexualities in intersection with other important categories including race, ethnicity, religion, class, disability and nationality.”\(^12\)

For some scholars, intersectionality’s flexibility\(^13\)—its status as an “open-ended concept”\(^14\)—explains its easy institutionalization.\(^15\) For others, intersectionality’s ubiquity can be explained by its co-optation by the “corporate university.” Intersectionality is imagined as a problematic “mantra of liberal multiculturalism”\(^16\) in an era where academic institutions rhetorically extol diversity.\(^17\) In this piece, I grapple with the question of intersectionality’s institutionalization differently than other scholars. I treat intersectionality as a feminist orientation in time, as an analytic that powerfully describes both what women’s studies could be and what women’s
studies has already become, that speaks about the discipline’s aspirations and progress.

The paper traces two ways that intersectionality is used by feminist scholars to speak about feminist time: the movement of intersectionality toward the inevitable future (what I call feminism-future) and the location of intersectionality in an already-transcended past (what I call feminism-past). Despite the fact that feminism-future and feminism-past seem opposed, I argue that these two temporal pulls are underpinned by corresponding logics. The logics of feminism-future are more and transformation: this body of work is filled with calls for more intersectionality, an attention to more intersections, and pleas for more disciplines adopting intersectionality. The call for more intersectionality is underpinned by a belief that the analytic can radically transform both women’s studies and conventional disciplines and that intersectionality itself can continually be perfected. The logics of feminism-past are beyond and incorporation: a call to move beyond intersectionality—its hegemony, its problematic practice, its shortcomings, and its insistent use of identity-based knowledge and remedies—and a sense that the valuable insights of intersectionality have already been incorporated into feminism. The paper, then, traces how these logics are amplified in feminist scholarship, producing intersectionality as an analytic that traverses feminist time.

One of the most significant ways that the logics of feminism-future and feminism-past coincide is in their shared and often-invisible racialized ideologies. When intersectionality is imagined as feminism’s future, intersectionality sheds black women in a postracial feminism that either presumes that black women need not be the center of intersectional work because intersectionality’s virtue is complexity not identity politics or that intersectionality is an endlessly expansive analytic that can—and should—describe all subjects’ experiences. When intersectionality is relegated to feminism’s past, its identitarian commitments are questioned, particularly in a moment in which identitarianism is “vilified by feminists of many different persuasions.” In both cases, it is intersectionality’s intimate engagement with black female flesh that is treated as suspect.

In emphasizing the racial politics underpinning intersectionality’s temporal logics, my paper presumes a fundamental relationship between black women and intersectionality. While I recognize that intersectionality emerged through women of color feminisms (inclusive of, but also beyond, black feminism), I am interested in tracing intersectionality as a particular juridical intervention that exposed the failure of antidiscrimination law to attend to black female plaintiffs’ injuries. Black women’s experience of doctrinal erasure was the harm that Kimberlé Crenshaw—the architect of intersectionality’s juridical iteration—sought both to reveal and to remedy. In presuming a fundamental relationship between intersectionality
and black women’s bodies, I part company with scholars like Ange-Marie Hancock, who argues, “The process of claiming intersectionality in the name of black women writers, Asian American female elected officials, or Latin American women’s movements obscures the very richness of the content—the multivocality for which intersectionality is known.” Instead, I locate the “very richness” of intersectionality’s content in its long and particular relationship with black women.

Though my paper asks about intersectionality’s relationship with black women’s bodies in the moment of intersectionality’s institutionalization, I should note that my argument here is not a proprietary one; I am not advocating that intersectionality should be deployed exclusively to examine black women’s experiences of marginalization or that intersectionality should be used only to describe black women’s experiences of subordination. In so doing, I differ from Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd who critiques the “(neo)colonization of intersectionality,” a “new wave of raced-gendered occultic commodification” that treats black women instrumentally or wholly ignores them, and from Rachel Luft and Jane Ward who warn that intersectionality “is increasingly being invoked absent intersectional efforts, be they theoretical, methodological, or tactical.” My work does not read intersectionality’s ubiquity as either a sign of black women’s “commodification” or white scholars’ “(neo)colonization” of black feminist work, terms that presume that intersectionality rightfully belongs to black women. Instead, I explore—and expose—how intersectionality’s temporal attachments, and thus the temporal attachments of women’s studies, hinge on problematic and heretofore invisible stories about black female bodies.

**Feminism-Future and the Rhetoric of Improvement**

If, as Rachel Lee notes, “Women’s Studies is always ‘about to be,’” then intersectionality is central to the field’s becoming. Intersectionality has become the analytic that marks the field of women’s studies, the hallmark of complex feminist scholarship, and feminist scholarship’s political and theoretical goal. Even as intersectionality is regularly described as fundamental to feminism’s future, it is also imagined as something that feminists have not—and might not ever—fully achieve. Robyn Wiegman argues that intersectionality will always disappoint, since the “political desires” that animate intersectionality are always greater than the analytic’s ability to enact social justice. Vivian May echoes this with the “impossibility thesis,” which presumes that “doing intersectional teaching, theorizing, research, or politics is regarded as an ideal, but not actually achievable.” Both Wiegman and May reveal that intersectionality is both part of feminism’s aspirational agenda, and one of feminism’s constant shortcomings. We are always failing to do what intersectionality
promises, and intersectionality is always failing to perform what we hope it might: “to render a vision of the world adequate to the political desire that engages us in it.”27 It is this “not-yet-ness” of intersectionality—the fact that intersectionality is treated as both essential to feminism’s future and as not yet perfected—that marks intersectionality’s orientation toward the future.28

I am particularly interested in detailing the intimate connections between intersectionality’s “not-yet-ness” and the logic of improvement. By logic of improvement, I mean both the presumption that intersectionality will perfect the field of women’s studies in significant ways and the idea that intersectionality needs to be improved to achieve its full analytical promise. I am invested both in claims like Nancy Hirschmann’s: “we are sometimes better at calling for intersectionality and proclaiming its importance than we are at actually doing it,”29 and in assertions like Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree’s—that intersectionality has a potentially transformative “underutilized potential.”30 Taken together, these contentions amplify the dual ways that intersectionality’s “not-yet-ness” is regularly linked to an ethic of improvement.

What intersectionality can achieve for feminism, and how it will improve feminism, are up for grabs. Intersectionality is, at times, described as a movement from sameness to difference,31 from essentialism to multiplicity, from the general to the particular.32 What is certain is that intersectionality promises feminism a new kind of “complexity.”33 As Leslie McCall notes (in a now-canonical article aptly titled “The Complexity of Intersectionality”), “The terms complex, complexity, and complexities appear frequently and are central in key texts on intersectionality.”34 Complexity becomes intersectionality’s virtue, a shorthand for a certain kind of intellectual, theoretical, and political labor, and a way of describing a desired feminist future. In this section, I examine how intersectionality animates collective ideas about feminism-future through various calls for more intersectionality and for an improved intersectionality. In all of these pleas, intersectionality is celebrated for its promise of new complexity, not for its relationship to black female bodies or for its capacity to remedy black women’s legal invisibility.

More

Feminist scholars located in disciplines outside of women’s studies routinely call on their fields to practice intersectionality under a theory that more practices of intersectionality will improve conventional disciplines’ analytical sophistication. In adopting intersectionality, disciplines are imagined to undo problems of exclusivity and to embrace the virtue of complexity that intersectionality engenders. Ann Garry, for example,
invites philosophers to embrace intersectionality because of its remedial possibilities. She notes, “I want to encourage traditional philosophers to do philosophy that is ‘part of the solution’ rather than ‘part of the problem.’ . . . I want to encourage feminist philosophers to be more genuinely pluralistic, especially to de-center white, middle-class women in our theories and practices. . . . I focus on intersectionality here in order to encourage philosophers to appreciate the multifaceted relationships among kinds of oppression and privilege.” For Garry, philosophy’s adoption of intersectionality is potentially transformative; it shifts the discipline from being “part of the problem” to “part of the solution.” Intersectionality is fashioned as a kind of disciplinary remedy, one that undoes philosophy’s exclusive theorizing, “de-center[s]” white women, and allows philosophers to pose new questions. Similarly, Gill Valentine reveals geography’s inattention to intersectionality, arguing that “the specific debate about intersectionality as a concept has not yet been played out within geography despite its obvious spatial connotations.” Valentine invites geographers to take up intersectionality as a strategy for complicating the discipline, and suggests that geographers are uniquely situated in their capacity to transform intersectionality as the discipline can empirically examine “intersectionality as lived experience,” attending to the intimate relationship between space and identity. Finally, Ange-Marie Hancock urges political scientists to use intersectionality to study “causal complexity” or “the multiple paths humans may take to the same political outcome.” In so doing, she encourages political scientists to treat intersectionality as a “paradigm rather than as a content specialization” and as a way of producing more sophisticated research. What Garry, Valentine, and Hancock share is a sense that more intersectionality can rehabilitate disciplines, adding new kinds of complexity to existing disciplinary debates. In all three cases, intersectionality is celebrated for its transformative ability, for what it could do to a conventional discipline if embraced. Intersectionality’s virtue in these accounts does not come from the analytic’s attachment to black women; rather, what intersectionality enables is a new kind of theoretical sophistication.

Other scholars articulate claims for “more” intersectionality by critiquing current practices of intersectionality that neglect significant structures of domination and by proposing a new intersectionality that centers undertheorized intersections. These claims are regularly proffered as a critique of intersectionality’s limited focus on race/gender (or black women) and as an insistence that intersectionality should be broadened to include a host of other intersections. Hirschmann, for example, argues that “disability is the new gender,” a category of analysis that scholars have to claim as a “serious enterprise . . . [that] should be part of the mainstream.” In treating disability as an analytically “serious enterprise,”
Hirschmann advocates an intersectionality attentive to “the intersections of disability with gender and sexuality” which “can thus yield productive new insights and complicate feminist analysis.” In so doing, she shows that the addition of disability to intersectionality is precisely what can produce feminist “complexity.” Bandana Purkayastha also imagines a more complex intersectionality, one that takes into account questions of transnationalism. She asks how intersectionality—including what she calls “the expanded version of race/class/gender/age/ability/sexuality/ethnicity/nation”—might be further complicated by the addition of new categories of analysis. Similarly, Maneesha Deckha argues that intersectionality has not attended to questions of species: “Experiences of gender, race, sexuality, ability, etc., are often based on and take shape through speciesist ideas of humanness vis-à-vis animality.” In all three cases, additions of new categories of analysis—disability, transnationalism, and species—expose intersectionality’s shortcomings, reveal significant ways of reforming intersectionality, and push intersectionality beyond its preoccupation with the race/gender intersection. These proposed additions to intersectionality perform the logic of more: they show that adding new categories to the ever-lengthening list of structures of domination (what Purkayastha calls the “expanded” version of intersectionality) will complicate, nuance, and deepen intersectionality’s analytical and political work.

Nowhere has the call for more intersectionality—and an attention to more intersections—been more profoundly developed than in the field of queer intersectionality. At first glance, it seems that queer theory and intersectionality would be at odds since queer theory is often marked by an investment in relationalities, affects, intensities, and politics outside of the identitarian. Yet scholars including Darren Rosenblum, Darren Hutchinson, Jerome Chang, Roderick Ferguson, Cathy Cohen, and Robert Culp have criticized intersectionality’s inattention to questions of sexuality and crafted a body of work that centers the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality; highlights the intimate connections between queer theory and black feminism’s intersectional commitments; and “link[s] our intersectional analysis of power with concrete coalitional work.” Queer intersectionality crafts an expansive intersectionality that recognizes that “most queers face multiple aspects of discrimination, as women, as people of color, as poor people, as cross-gendered people, and as sexual subversives.” This broad conception of marginality asks how abjection and subordination are themselves queer formations experienced differently by subjects who inhabit distinct social locations. Ultimately, this work “bring[s] to intersectionality scholarship . . . [an] examination of heterosexist subordination (alongside race, gender, and class), a topic that is omitted from much of the intersectionality literature” and reveals the limits of conventional intersectionality while also gesturing toward the future of
intersectionality: an attention to more intersections, and an investment in how multiple structures of domination—racism, sexism, homophobia, heteronormativity—collude.46

Improvement

If scholars call for more disciplinary work on intersections as a way of improving their fields, they also advocate an improved intersectionality. According to this narrative, at its inception intersectionality attended only to race/gender (and to black women particularly), but a complex intersectionality requires attention both to understudied intersections (e.g., class/sexuality) and to multiple intersections (e.g., race/sexuality/disability). Calls for an attention to more intersections share the idea that Crenshaw’s original articulation of intersectionality can be reformed in order to yield more complex analyses of structures of domination. In so doing, these pleas imagine an intersectionality with more “analytic bite,”47 and promise an intersectionality that “live[s] up to its potential . . . to grasp the complex realities it was initially intended to address.”48

Claims to more intersections are often articulated in reference to Crenshaw’s now-famous traffic metaphor.49 For Crenshaw, discrimination could be analogized to traffic flowing through a clogged intersection; a collision could be caused by any one of the multiple cars flowing through the intersection or by many of them simultaneously, and assigning accountability to only one driver might be impossible. Similarly, for black women, discrimination can be race based, gender based, or both, and a legal regime that cannot recognize—or remedy—raced and gendered harms ignores a significant set of black women’s injuries. It has become a scholarly tradition to extend Crenshaw’s work by adding new configurations of roadwork onto her metaphor, effectively problematizing the “Big Three” approach to intersectional work, an approach that focuses on gender, race, and class.50 Garry notes, “As I have visualized intersectionality over two decades, I have added many more streets to the intersection and placed a roundabout in its center.”51 The addition of “many more streets” and a “roundabout” adds a new kind of analytical complexity to intersectionality. Garry’s intervention suggests that transforming Crenshaw’s imagined race-and-gender intersection into an ever-complicated rotary, one with multiple streets converging filled with endless possibility for collisions, usefully nuances intersectionality and that intersectionality can be made ever more complicated by using Crenshaw’s intersection as a starting point for more nuanced metaphors.

Other scholars suggest that the traffic metaphor needs to be revised to unleash intersectionality’s analytical complexity. Hancock fundamentally remakes the intersection metaphor, arguing, “It [intersectionality]
updates us from the 1970s, rotary-dial-types of politics and moves us more toward iPhone and Blackberry politics.\textsuperscript{52} Intersectionality—like smartphones—can be endlessly updated, complicated, and “modernized,” revised to resonate with the complexities of everyday life. Similarly, Christy-Dale Sims argues that a “faceted crystal” is a useful revision of the intersection metaphor. Crystals, she asserts, are “multidimensional” and “differ in size, form, and composition.”\textsuperscript{53} What this revised metaphor captures is that “no matter where you fall within the planes of the crystal, every aspect of one’s identity is constantly taken into account because all the various facets are required to create the whole.”\textsuperscript{54} And Ivy Ken turns toward another metaphor—sugar—and argues that “what is important about sugar is that it is produced, combined, consumed, and digested in ways that help illustrate how elements of race, class, and gender are produced, combined, consumed and digested. . . . Sugar, by itself, does not reveal much about relationships. But sugar is never by itself, any more than race, class, gender, or any other organizing mechanism is.”\textsuperscript{55} For Ken, it is sugar’s multifacetedness and its effects on the composition of the body that make it a useful metaphor for understanding how race, gender, and class coalesce. What Hancock, Sims, and Ken share is extending Crenshaw’s commitment to metaphor politics; indeed, all three deploy metaphor to describe the complex ways social structures act on the body. Taken together, their work reveals that Crenshaw’s “original” metaphor—the traffic collision—can be endlessly improved, modernized, and remade to craft new metaphors that more adequately capture “multidimensionality.”

This same logic of improvement is, at times, amplified as a need to learn more about how intersectionality is experienced in order to understand the mechanisms by which race, gender, class, and sexuality coincide. For scholars who advocate an empirical intersectionality, attention to lived experiences of intersectional subjectivity are thought to nuance theoretical visions of intersectionality and to test the validity of intersectionality. Ken argues, “We need some analytical tools that are more specific and systematic than ‘intersection’—tools that require us (and make it somewhat easier for us) to investigate how and when and under what circumstances race, class, and gender intersect, if they in fact intersect at all.”\textsuperscript{56} Yvette Taylor makes similar claims when she suggests that we “progress beyond intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm, towards understanding intersectionality as a lived experience where social class and sexuality may be understood as contested, intersecting categories.”\textsuperscript{57} The move from the “theoretical” to the “lived” is a strategy for crafting a grounded intersectionality, a way of signaling one future research agenda of intersectionality, and a strategy for producing an improved and more rigorous intersectionality.

What I have shown so far is that intersectionality is often imagined as part of feminism’s inevitable future; indeed, feminists regularly argue that
if intersectionality is practiced better, if it is adopted by new disciplines, if it is attentive to new intersections, if it is empirically tested, the analytic has the capacity to radically remake both women’s studies and related disciplines. Intersectionality, then, is a work in progress, a “not-yet-ness” which always makes promises, and what it promises is new complexity. Of course, complexity is its own shorthand for feminism’s futurity, a term that can produce political anxiety (questions like “At what point does complexity turn into research chaos?” capture this anxiety58) and that can gesture to the open-endedness of feminism’s future. Ultimately, intersectionality’s complexity, no matter how it is imagined, is treated as a kind of remedy; if perfected, intersectionality can effectively cure women’s studies of violent histories of exclusion.

The idea of intersectionality as part of the inevitable feminist future, as the what-could-be, is often paired with the idea that intersectionality can be practiced without black women. Some scholars explicitly make the claim that intersectionality can—and should—transcend its origins in black feminism. Hancock asks:

What if, as noble a pursuit as it is, I do not wish to study women of color? What can I gain from intersectionality? I think intersectionality can help us better conceive research designs and data collection through its attentiveness to causal complexity. . . . Scholars need more and better standards of assessment to (1) distinguish among intersectional research and women of color studies and (2) to adjudicate among the contributions in order to refine and sharpen intersectionality’s contribution to the discipline.59

For Hancock, intersectionality’s promise and analytic power comes from the fact that it can act as a general method for enacting social science research apart from “women of color studies.” Indeed, Hancock illuminates, intersectionality can be practiced (and can produce “gains”) for those with no theoretical or political interest in women of color. Similarly, Choo and Ferree emphasize that intersectionality’s future is in its transcendence of black female bodies, as it offers a way of interpreting “social phenomena” apart from the specific social locations of black women. They prescribe an intersectionality that “offer[s] a method applying to all social phenomena, not just the inclusion of a specifically subordinated group.60 Both reveal how intersectionality’s location in feminism-future is tethered to a very specific racial politic: one where intersectionality circulates beyond or apart from black women.

Calls for an intersectionality that transcends black women often advocate the construction of an intersectionality attentive to privilege, that captures how privilege and oppression work together to mark lived experience and that theorizes how dominance shapes all subjects’ lives. Cynthia Levine-Rasky, for example, proposes an intersectionality that can
ask questions like: “What are whiteness and middle-classness and how are they practiced? What are the historical, economic, cultural, political contexts that gave rise to them?” These queries shift intersectionality from a preoccupation with multiple marginalization toward an interest in structures of domination more generally. Similarly, Nancy Ehrenreich advocates a “hybrid intersectionality” that centers subjects who are both privileged and oppressed. Indeed, Ehrenreich suggests, all subjects inhabit a space of hybridity since no one experiences either total marginality or total privilege. She writes, “Each individual is a complex mix of subordinated and dominant statuses; it is virtually impossible for someone to always find herself on the bottom of every social hierarchy. Even a low-income, lesbian Latina might be able-bodied, slender, or not elderly.”

This fundamental interest in moving away from bottom politics, away from imagining the bodies that are the sites of multiple collisions (to evoke Crenshaw’s metaphor), is often articulated as an idea that multiple marginality is a kind of fiction that harms black women. Anna Carastathis shows that intersectionality’s focus on black women as “the paradigm intersectional subjects” runs the risk of reifying precisely what intersectionality sought to disrupt: the idea that oppressions are cumulative and add up to produce black women as the most marginalized subjects. Instead, a new intersectionality asks how marginality and privilege circulate and intersect; of course, in this new intersectionality, black women implicitly become decentered, as marginality explicitly becomes decentered. In their place, intersectionality becomes an analytic through which all subjects can locate themselves. Indeed, in this new iteration of intersectionality—one where intersectionality is part of feminism’s futurity—it is politically and theoretically desirable that intersectionality act as an analytic in and through which everyone can locate themselves, a tool through which each subject’s social situatedness can be described.

In this section, I traced a set of rhetorical strategies that place intersectionality as the time of feminism’s future, as the what-could-be of women’s studies. In this call, intersectional work can always be perfected, and in improving intersectionality, the field of women’s studies (and related fields) can be remade. What interests me about this logic of improvement is how it hinges on an idea of postraciality: that black women need not be the center of—or even a part of—intersectional work and that an analytic that emerged from a particular racialized and gendered legal injury can be designed to speak about all subjects’ identities. In describing a moment where intersectionality has traversed disciplinary borders, Alexander-Floyd argues that feminist scholarship now “disappears black women.” My analysis reveals that this “disappearing” happens through placing intersectionality—and its promise—in the future. When feminists locate intersectionality as the great feminist future, and insist that intersection-
ality can—and should—circulate apart from black female bodies, they implicitly suggest that black women’s bodies are not part of feminism’s future, that black women’s bodies are historical objects that pull feminism back from the promise of futurity to the burdensome past.

Feminism-Past and the Rhetoric of Incorporation

As much as intersectionality enables scholars to imagine what women’s studies could be, intersectionality also marks feminism’s past. It is not uncommon, particularly in the midst of a moment marked by a suspicion of identitarian work, to hear intersectionality described as “located within the late seventies or the late eighties.” If intersectionality can be located in feminism’s historical past—as a set of critiques that emerged decades ago—it can also be situated in feminism’s political past because feminism has recognized the analytic’s importance, responded to intersectional interventions, and incorporated intersectional critiques into feminist work. Indeed, scholars now regularly narrate feminist history as a series of transformations produced by women of color feminists: “Race, class, and gender were once seen as separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups. Now scholars generally agree that these issues (as well as ethnicity, nation, age and sexuality)—and how they intersect—are integral to individuals’ positions in the social world.” In this account—one that Clare Hemmings terms a “progress” narrative—intersectionality has already arrived, and occupied center stage in feminist work. In fact, it is intersectionality’s dominance within feminist work that has allowed some to consider intersectional work as complete and even passé. As Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines, and Mark Casey note, “‘Intersectionality’ has been significantly critiqued within feminist theory and is now even dismissively branded as ‘outmoded’ and ‘outdated.’”

If intersectionality is part of a moment in feminism’s history, then feminism-past is underpinned by a call for moving “beyond” intersectionality. The logic animating the call for “beyond” is dual: a sense that the field has already been radically transformed by the intervention or that there is something dangerous about continuing to practice identity work like intersectionality. Indeed, if identity work is imagined to be part of feminism’s past, then it is intersectionality’s intimate relationship with black women’s marginality that renders intersectionality outdated. Rachel Lee articulates how this narrative gets amplified: “An almost exhausted sentiment that the challenge made by women of color to Women’s Studies is well work and that as we narrate and proceed into the future of feminism, the only thing for sure is that Women’s Studies ought not be invested in those angry charges made by women of color that they were excluded, because now they are included—even dominant—in Women’s Studies.”

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mance of this exhaustion narrative reveals that the “challenges” women of color feminism amplified are imagined to *already* be “included” in the contemporary labor of women’s studies, offering scholars the freedom to move beyond intersectionality generally, and intersectionality’s investment in black women particularly. In this portion of the paper, I trace a feminist narrative that situates intersectionality in the past and presumes that women’s studies has already incorporated intersectionality into feminist theory. In particular, I examine how calls for moving “beyond” are amplified in feminist scholarship, with a particular interest in exposing how they often operate as a call to transcend the “problem” of intersectionality: the analytic’s imagined investment in identitarianism, in the specificities of black female flesh. Like *feminism-future*, when intersectionality is part of *feminism-past*, it operates by staking out a particular relationship with black women’s bodies; in this account, black women’s bodies are “firmly identified with the past,” “anachronisms,” and historical objects.

Incorporation

Part of the call to move beyond intersectionality is a critique of how intersectionality has come to be practiced as it has transitioned from outsider knowledge to institutionalized framework. Indeed, some argue that intersectionality has become a kind of simplification, one so preoccupied with particularity—with locating subjects through the production of a seemingly endless list of adjectives—that it relies on precisely the categories it purports to disrupt. Wendy Brown writes: “Subject construction itself does not occur in discrete units as race, class, nation, and so forth. So the model of power developed to apprehend the making of a particular subject/ion will never accurately describe or trace the lines of a living subject. Nor can this paradox be resolved through greater levels of specificity in the models themselves e.g., mapping the precise formation of the contemporary middle class Tejana lesbian. This subject, too, is a fiction.”

For Brown, intersectionality gestures toward particularity by offering an ever-extending list of categories—race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, disability—but never actually grapples with the “fictiveness” of the categories it deploys, nor attends to the fact that subjectivity is not experienced in “discrete units” of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Here, Brown references the figure of the “contemporary middle class Tejana lesbian” as an example of intersectionality’s investment in particularity. The additions of “contemporary” and “middle class” to “Tejana lesbian” both point to a more specific imagined subject and reinvest intersectionality in categories it should undermine. Nira Yuval-Davis echoes these concerns, arguing that intersectionality reifies “fragmentation and multiplication of
the wider categorical identities rather than more dynamic, shifting and multiple constructions of intersectionality.”72 The problem of intersectionality, then, is that its attention to particularity never challenges the structures of domination that incessantly reduce subjects to fictive categories.

If intersectionality hinges on a problematic impulse toward particularity, some argue that it also relies on fictive fixity, treating race, gender, class, and other categories as separable rather than intimately enmeshed. Jasbir Puar asserts that intersectionality “presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytically and can thus be disassembled. . . . Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity.”73 Rather than treating categories as Crenshaw proposed, as intimately entangled and unknowable apart from each other, intersectionality as practiced has treated race, gender, class, and sexuality as separate and distinct “components” that simply coincide to mark subjects’ experiences.

Both Brown and Puar’s respective critiques of intersectionality’s failures—its incessant particularity and its relentless fixity—are underpinned by an implicit starting point: that intersectionality has come to be dominant within feminist studies, that it is practiced and circulated in a way that differs from how it was “originally” articulated, and that it has come to be “consolidat[ed] . . . as a dominant heuristic.”74 My interest in these two critiques is that they are underpinned by the belief that intersectionality has arrived, that it has fundamentally transformed the nature of feminist work so much so that, as Puar notes, “an interest in exploring other frames, for example assemblage, gets rendered as problematic and even produces WOC [women of color] feminists invested in other genealogies as ‘race-traitors.’”75 Taken together, the shared starting point for these two criticisms is that intersectionality has become the prevailing way of speaking about so-called difference within women’s studies, so much so that speaking about personhood and power outside of intersectionality can be an act of “traitorousness.”

Beyond

If intersectionality has arrived and has been incorporated into feminist thought, a host of scholars have advocated moving “beyond” it, offering other analytics that circumvent intersectionality’s essentialisms and elisions. It is important to note that many of the calls for “beyond” are implicitly critiques of how intersectionality is practiced now, criticisms of “the changed geopolitics of reception as well as a tendency towards reification in the deployment of intersectionality” and not necessarily critiques of the intersectional commitments Crenshaw advocated in her
two now-canonical essays. Calls to move “beyond” intersectionality, then, are pleas to transcend intersectionality’s current practice rather than critiques of intersectionality as a juridical remedy.

For some scholars, moving “beyond” intersectionality constitutes an attempt to think more rigorously about the constitution of the structures of domination that intersectionality merely traces. Maria Gonzalez notes:

Intersectionality in itself . . . cannot explain either the sources of inequalities or their reproduction over time; intersectionality must be placed in the “institutional bases of power shaping race, class and gender.” What are these institutional bases of power? How do we identify them? How do we link intersectionality to its macro level conditions of possibility, those “interlocking” structures of oppression? It is here that the RGC [race, gender, class] perspective runs into a theoretical dead end which the abundance of metaphors (e.g., interlocking, intersecting, etc.) can neither hide nor overcome.

For Gonzalez, intersectionality’s shortcoming is that it is descriptive, locating subjects within structures of domination rather than theorizing power, providing scholars with tools for locating power’s workings but not for determining its modes of domination and reproduction. It is intersectionality’s tendency to describe rather than deconstruct that leads her to call for a move “beyond” it, and for an embrace of a Marxist analytical frame which recognizes that “class is qualitatively different from gender and race and cannot be considered just another system of oppression.” Similarly, Carastathis advocates a move “beyond” intersectionality toward a “solidarity” politics that “(1) performs a structural analysis of the ways in which systems of oppression ‘interlock’ and of the ways in which subjects are located in and reproduce these systems. It (2) involves an actual commitment to transforming the structural relations that sub-tend these systems.” Like Gonzalez, Carastathis critiques intersectionality’s failure to theorize the contours and constitutions of structures of domination and instead advocates a new kind of feminist politics, one that does not abandon identity altogether but instead “distinguishes between being positioned or situated in relations of oppression and privilege—an ineluctable fact of life under prevailing conditions—and positioning or situating oneself in relations of solidarity with ‘communities of struggle.’” For Carastathis, what intersectionality illuminates (that we are “positioned or situated”) does little to engender activism, whereas solidarity offers radical openings for unexpected connections among “communities of struggle.” In both cases, the call for beyond—whether in the form of Marxist theory or a feminist solidarity politics—is a way of reanimating feminist politics and rigorously engaging with the ways in which structures of domination are produced and reproduced.

Perhaps the most-cited call for moving “beyond” intersectionality
is Puar’s advocacy of assemblage. While Puar concedes that assemblage need not wholly replace intersectionality, that “intersectional identities and assemblages must remain as interlocutors in tension,” she also celebrates assemblage’s ability to center dynamism, contingency, affect, sensation, and movement, rather than “locality, specificity, placement, junctions.” She writes: “There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather, queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melting, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics—by control theorists.

While intersectionality locates subjects, describes their social positions, and asks how race and gender operate in conjunction to mark that position, assemblage privileges motion, contingency, and dynamism, asking about forms of “belonging,” relationalities, and intensities that are not—and cannot be—captured by identity politics. If the “move from intersectionality to assemblage,” the move beyond intersectionality, jetisons intersectionality’s relentless fixity by centering movement, it also undoes intersectionality’s problematic relationship with black women. As Puar notes, “The method of intersectionality is most predominantly used to qualify the specific ‘difference’ of ‘women of color,’ a category that has now become, I would argue, simultaneously emptied of specific meaning on the one hand and overdetermined in its deployment on the other. In this usage, intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman Of Color (WOC), who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance.” Indeed, Puar critiques how intersectionality renders the category “women of color” both empty and overflowing with meaning, and she problematizes the ways that black women’s bodies become metaphors of difference, of resistance, of marginality. In critically assessing intersectionality’s symbolic attachment to black women’s flesh, Puar’s assemblage moves beyond the privileged analytical place of black women toward a new kind of theoretical framework that decenters identity entirely. While this framework productively centers motion, affect, and intensity in theories of subjectivity, it moves intersectionality away from its remedial purpose, its investment in critiquing and responding to a set of harms that render invisible black women’s injuries.

If assemblage centers movement and affect, other scholars have called for a genealogical approach to power that moves beyond the problems of intersectionality. Ladelle McWhorter treats intersectionality—in its dominant form—as “just a strategy to avoid charges of racism or classism,” a way of nominally speaking race without meaningfully speaking about race. Like Puar, McWhorter suggests that intersectionality as practiced
and institutionalized is problematic precisely because it merely satisfies demands for diversity. Instead of an analytic like intersectionality, which centers the experiences of those at the margins, McWhorter advocates a “genealogical analysis of racism” that reveals “not only that identities are contingent; we also learn what their contingencies are, what invests them, and what holds them in place. A genealogical analysis thus helps to open doors for resistance.” The turn toward genealogy “establish[es] how and in what contexts these concepts—race, sex, and class—and the phenomena they organize arose and functioned in a prefeminist (or perhaps early feminist) past” and reveals that race and gender are underpinned by similar workings of power.

When intersectionality is located in feminism-past, intersectionality is treated as something that has already arrived, and feminism is imagined to have already institutionalized intersectionality so that we can now think about dominant ways that intersectionality is practiced. Indeed, intersectionality is often imagined as a set of practices and analytics that can inflict violence (including producing and reproducing the category of injured “woman of color”) and ossify cumulative conceptions of identity. It is the variety of ways that intersectionality is now performed—which is often imagined as different than how it was originally conceptualized—that has led scholars to advocate moving beyond intersectionality toward new analytics that capture the complexity of personhood and structures of domination in new ways. Of course, the call to move beyond intersectionality is also often a call to move beyond the centrality of black women’s bodies to feminist work, a call that emerges from a moment critical of identity work and its fictions and elisions. Whether it is a critique of the metaphorical work black women’s bodies are called upon to perform or a criticism of a theory constructed around the multiply marginalized, intersectionality’s form in feminism-past is one that treats a preoccupation with the social location of black women as problematically outdated.

**Institution Time**

This paper treats intersectionality as a temporal project and argues that it is intersectionality’s powerful ability to speak about the progress and aspiration of women’s studies, to describe disciplinary history and ambition simultaneously, that helps explain the analytic’s easy institutionalization. This paper also reveals that intersectionality’s temporal orientations have their own racial logic, one that marks both intersectionality’s future and past orientation. Indeed, in both feminism-future and feminism-past, intersectionality’s imagined peril hinges on its attachment to black women’s bodies, and its promise comes from its willingness to transcend the
(imagined) social location of black women. In feminism-future, intersectionality’s possibilities emerge from moving away from black women, and in feminism-past, intersectionality’s identitarian dangers and essentialist shortcomings come from its attachment to black women. In both cases, it is intersectionality’s intimacy with black women that is imagined to devalue the analytic, and it is transcending black women that is imagined to rescue intersectionality from obsolescence and to transform the field of women’s studies.

My work on the temporal logics of intersectionality reveals that in contemporary feminist practice, black female bodies (and perhaps black feminism itself) are treated outside of our unfolding present moment. Indeed, exploring intersectionality’s temporal labor shows that the time of our unfolding present has been constructed with an insistent belief that black female bodies are either historical subjects whose critiques have already been heard, or harbingers of a future where intersectionality belongs to all. In either case, black women’s bodies are not the subjects of the present moment; they are, in fact, always constructed as out of time. This paper, then, argues that the ongoing preoccupation of women’s studies with intersectionality—as relic and as hope, as artifact and as aspiration—performs a certain kind of violence on black women’s bodies and on black feminism: presuming that black women’s bodies are always already anachronisms.

Notes

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8. I agree with Rachel E. Luft and Jane Ward, who write, “Intersectionality is often misidentified as the purview of feminism and women’s studies. . . . As the latest in a long line of challenges by women of color to feminism and other historically essentializing, binary discourses, intersectionality is both inside and outside of feminism and women’s studies.” Rachel E. Luft and Jane Ward, “Toward an Intersectionality Just Out of Reach: Confronting Challenges to Intersectional Practice,” in *Perceiving Gender Locally, Globally, and Intersectionally*, ed. Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Texler Segal (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Group, 2009), 12.


10. National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) 2009 conference “Difficult Dialogues” examined “how feminist intellectual, political, and institutional practices cannot be adequately practiced if the politics of gender are conceptualized (overtly or implicitly) as superseding or transcending the politics of race, sexuality, social class, nation, and disability” (from the NWSA 2009 call for papers, http://nwsa.wordpress.com). The Eastern Sociological Society’s 2011 theme was “Intersectionalities and Complex Inequalities.”

11. See *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 11, no. 4 (2009); *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (July 2006); and *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013), as just a few examples of journal issues devoted to intersectionality.

12. See Emory University’s Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department’s website, http:// wgss.emory.edu/home/index.html.

13. See Davis, “Intersectionality as Buzzword.”


15. See Davis, “Intersectionality as Buzzword.”


18. My understanding of incorporation is indebted to Wiegman’s work.


27. Wiegman, Object Lessons, 89.
32. See Wiegman, Object Lessons.
47. Choo and Ferree, “Practicing Intersectionality,” 129.
49. The centrality of this metaphor, as opposed to the other metaphor that Crenshaw deploys in “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” the basement metaphor, is the subject of Anna Carastathis, “Basements and Intersections,” Hypatia, early view, 4 July 2013. DOI: 10.1111/hypa.12044.
50. Kathy Davis, “Intersectionality in Transatlantic Perspective,” in Über-


54. Ibid.

55. Ivy Ken, Digesting Race, Class, and Gender: Sugar as a Metaphor (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 12

56. Ibid., 5.


60. Choo and Ferree, “Practicing Intersectionality,” 133.


68. Lee, “Notes from the (non)Field,” 95.


71. Juana Rodriguez writes, “Identity is more than a list of categories that name our sexuality, gender, HIV status, nation, age, ethnicity, ability, class, language, citizenship status, and religion. . . . What aspects of identity exceed the categories we have created to define our places in the world?” Juana Maria Rodriguez, Queer Latinidad (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 21–22.


75. Puar, “Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.”
76. Ibid.
77. Maria Gonzalez, “Marxism and Class, Gender and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy,” Race, Gender, and Class 8, no. 2 (2001): 23–33.
80. Ibid.
81. Puar, “Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.”
82. Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, 212.
83. Ibid., 211.
84. Puar, “Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.”
86. McWhorter, “Sex, Race, and Biopower,” 39.