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INTERSECTIONALITY AS TRAVELLING THEORY— POSSIBILITIES FOR DIALOGUES

Kathy Davis and Helma Lutz

We can imagine that you—the readers—are wondering whether we really need another book on intersectionality. In the past two decades, an enormous number of publications about intersectionality have appeared: articles, books, special issues, edited collections, and, yes, even a handbook or two. Perhaps it is time to say: enough is enough. And yet, we decided that there were some very good reasons, after all, to embark on one more book about intersectionality and we hope that the present volume will convince you why this is the case.

Why a Handbook on Intersectionality Studies?

We have both followed the trajectory of intersectionality, beginning with its origins in US Black feminism to the coining of the famous term by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and through the past three decades in which it has become a full-fledged discipline: ‘intersectionality studies’. We have tracked how the concept intersectionality has travelled: from legal studies to other disciplines, from the US to other parts of the world, and from the academy to the world outside: organisations, politics, and social activism. And we have observed the lively and—in some cases—heated debates on both sides of the Atlantic and they have convinced us that the last word on the possibilities and pitfalls of intersectionality will probably remain unsaid for many more years to come. There is always just one more facet that needs to be explored, another worry that needs to be addressed, or one more improvement that ought to be undertaken. There seems to be no end of topics that lend themselves to an intersectional analysis, and a range of methodologies have been developed for widening the horizon of research across a range of social inequalities, identities, and differences in power.

Three developments in particular have made us think that a sustained reflection on the current state of affairs in intersectionality studies is in order.

The first is that the term intersectionality is no longer limited to gender and critical studies within the academy, but it has popped up in all kinds of unexpected places outside the academy as well. A case in point is Flavia Dzodan’s famous online essay in which she wrote ‘Feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit’.¹ This went from being a

powerful rallying cry for a more inclusive and critical feminism to an internet meme that was marketed on T-shirts and posters (from which, parenthetically, Dzodan never saw a dime). Intersectionality is not just popular among activists and on the internet, however. Recently, politicians have been calling themselves ‘intersectional’ as well. A recent example in the Netherlands is a small political party devoted to putting everyday racism on the agenda.² Its leader, Sylvanna Simons, a charismatic woman of colour, known for her feminist, anti-racist radio programmes, expressly presented the party as ‘intersectional’, meaning it would tackle all inequalities and their interrelations. The term did not become a household word, however, until a member of her party accused her of trying to be everyone’s friend and forgetting that racism cannot be combatted unless choices are made. A heated debate ensued about whether racism or sexism was more important, catapulting the term intersectionality into living rooms across the country. Another example comes from Frankfurt/M. Germany where Marianne Mahn won a seat for the Frankfurt City’s Green Party’s parliamentary group in March 2021. Her poster claimed ‘My feminism is intersectional’ (see Figure 1.1).

Only several years ago, a message like this would have been confusing or inconceivable. Today, in this ‘Global City’, most young voters grew up in families with diverse backgrounds and/or migration histories. Many of them are alert to and/or have experiences of their own with regard to social exclusion and discrimination. They, along with young, female and academic voters, clearly felt addressed by Mahn’s poster and voted her into the Frankfurt parliament. In addition to the concept being taken up in political movements and by politicians, the term intersectionality is now appearing on tote bags and T-shirts, as decorative statements on young women’s fashion and children’s toys, as slogans on coffee mugs, and as bumper stickers and car decals. As Jennifer Nash argues in this volume, such representations have made intersectionality increasingly visible in the public domain, while, at the same time, raising questions about the meaning of the term. Taken together, these examples suggest that intersectionality has been appropriated and is moving in different directions—directions that beg for further exploration.

The second reason for a handbook is the trajectory the term has taken inside the academy itself. Initially, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) used a crossroad as metaphor for intersectionality, in which different social structures and identities are described as intersecting roads (gender road, race road, etc.), producing traffic that requires a power analysis. Since then, the term and the metaphor (see Amund Hoffart in this volume) have enjoyed a notable career, both inside and outside gender studies. While earlier feminist thinkers adopted an ‘add-on’ approach to categories of difference in power,³ intersectionality appeared to establish a new agenda. Crenshaw (2000) rejected the additive approach, arguing that intersectionality could capture both the structural and the dynamic consequences of the *interaction* between two or more axes of subordination.⁴ During the *UN World Conference against Racism* in Durban 2001, her idea of crossings between systems of oppression found global resonance. While many precursor terms like Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990) ‘interlocking systems of oppression’ and ‘matrix of domination’ did not take off in quite the same way as intersectionality did, intersectionality as a label ‘combined an appealing level of abstraction with a comforting appearance of value-neutrality’ (Ferree, 2013: 379; see also Knapp, 2013). In a similar vein, Davis has argued that intersectionality became a ‘buzzword’ precisely because of its open-endedness and adaptability to diverse contexts. ‘The concept’s very lack of precision and its myriad missing pieces are what have made it such a useful heuristic device for

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Figure 1.1 Slogan used by City Councillor in Frankfurt (photographer: Katharina Dubno).

critical feminist theory' (Davis, 2008a: 78). Others have contested this, arguing for a more precise, historically coherent use of intersectionality (Bilge, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013, 2017). While the last word has not been said in this debate—something that is addressed in the present volume by several authors—what is clear is that intersectionality has long left the fields in which it originated—gender studies, critical race studies and law. It is now used in sociology and social work, health studies, education, social geography, anthropology, psychology, political sciences, literature studies, and even architecture.

A third and related reason for this handbook is the emergence of a field of studies devoted to intersectionality. Although most universities do not yet have academic departments with this name, intersectionality has been increasingly adopted by gender studies centres and departments that use intersectionality as a keyword for course offerings in BA and MA programmes. In 2003, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall argued that intersectionality had become so institutionalised that it could realistically be called a field of its own and the term 'intersectionality studies' was born. However, this development was met with decidedly mixed feelings among feminist scholars of intersectionality. The German sociologists Cornelia Klinger and Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2008), for example, embraced intersectionality's potential for building a 'grand' theory, but were concerned with the tendency among intersectional scholars to let go of gender as a master category by declaring that no category is sacrosanct. They also argued that the term itself does not enable us to identify how and by what means race, class and gender are constituted as distinct social categories on a structural level. This argument is also made by Maria Azocar and Myra Marx Ferree in this volume. Moreover, once gender is decentred, it can easily become superfluous, thereby raising the fear of a political backlash in academia. Other (German) authors disagreed with this pessimistic assessment. For example, Katharina Walgenbach (2010) considers intersectionality a promising new paradigm for the scientific community precisely because it offers a set of terms, theoretical interventions, premises, problem definitions, as well as suggested solutions. The emergence of intersectionality as a field of study, replete with its own history, theories, methodologies, and debates designed to monitor its boundaries against unauthorised intruders, is itself reason for reflection. For example, what are the consequences of institutionalising what was initially meant to be a critical concept for social justice struggles? How do academic debates emerge about the theoretical implications of the term and what is the effect of these debates on intersectionality's political relevance? And what happens when intersectionality appears in the public domain as a slogan or a commodity?

Taken together, all three reasons indicate that intersectionality needs to be explored with an eye to how it has travelled and the ways it has been used, both within and outside the academy. This is not simply a matter of geography—that is, travelling from the US to Europe. Intersectionality has been taken up in many parts of the world. And, paradoxically, even when it has not been taken up, feminist scholars have felt compelled to account for its lack of relevance, particularly outside the US (see, for example, the Lyn Ossome's and Mara Viveros Vigoya's contributions in this volume). Lately, generational differences have emerged in how intersectionality is—or should be—taken up. Recent events like the Black Lives Matter movement and #MeToo have influenced debates about intersectionality (see Barbara Giovanna Bello's discussion of the international influence of these movements in this volume), whereby the concept continues to change and be employed in new ways. Understanding these developments requires looking at intersectionality's history through the lens of the present. What is it that brings critical scholars and activists back to intersectionality again and again? Why is intersectionality constantly being elaborated, re-worked

and deployed for different purposes and on different terrains? In other words, what is it about the concept of intersectionality that enables it to constantly reinvent itself?

A Brief History

We start this handbook by looking at the history of intersectionality's transatlantic and transversal travels. In their seminal article *Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality*, Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004) traced the term's historic background, citing the speech of the 19th-century US-Anti-Slavery activist Sojourner Truth as its origin. In this speech, Sojourner Truth spoke before an audience of white abolitionists, dramatically noting the differences in her life as a formerly enslaved person and the lives of the women in the audience. She demonstrated that the struggle for women's suffrage must include the struggle for the suffrage of Black people. Vivian May (2014; and in this volume) has also convincingly argued that we need to take the history of Black feminist writing more seriously in order to situate the roots of intersectional thinking in Black women's experiences with complex configurations of power. Another pivotal and more recent example which did not use the term intersectionality, yet demonstrated intersectional thinking, is the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective (1977/1986) in which the race-class-gender triad was expanded to include sexuality. Other US feminist scholar-activists like bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Angela Davis analysed the intersections between gendered and racialised inequalities throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, when Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to describe intersecting social identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination, it took off very quickly and, in fact, often triggered a search for antecedents among feminists of colour and feminists with a migration background across the globe. As a result, discoveries have been made of pioneering women who were already trying to tackle the mutual constitution of race, class, and gender before the term intersectionality existed. Their work, often forgotten, has been rediscovered and used as foundation for specifying the complicated and multi-faceted genealogies of intersectional thinking.

If the issues that intersectionality was intended to address were not new, they received an impetus with the introduction of the concept (Davis, 2008a). It seemed, at first glance, to be ideally suited to some of the most pressing issues facing US feminism. It promised to redress the problematic exclusion of the specific experiences of women of colour from earlier feminist scholarship by drawing attention to the ways these experiences were different and exacerbated vulnerabilities. It offered a more systematic approach to multiple oppressions by showing how they converge at different levels (structural, political, and representational). It put an end to the problematic strategy of drawing analogies between gender and race and between the experiences of women and people of colour by focussing on the specific ways race is 'gendered' and gender is 'raced' (see Stepan, 1986). And, finally, it offered a potential methodology for doing critical, feminist, anti-racist research; namely, 'asking the other question' (Matsuda, 1991). This methodology (as illustrated by Davis and Lutz in this volume) makes it possible to show how multiple positions and power inequalities actually operate in specific contexts and through specific practices.

Intersectionality was not only taken up in US Black feminism and gender studies. It 'travelled' to other disciplines as well as organisations and social movements outside the academy. And it travelled geographically, making its way across the Atlantic and to other parts of the world. As we know from Edward Said's (1983, 2000) seminal work on traveling theory, concepts, theories and ideas that circulate are invariably subject to amendments

and changes as they are taken up by different audiences in different settings. Detached from the original context, such ‘borrowings’ or ‘appropriations’ transform the concept and its use. As intersectionality was taken up in academic settings, both within and outside the US, it generated a plethora of theoretical debates (Davis, 2008b, 2020; Lutz, 2016). For example, scholars began to explore which and how many categories of difference were required for an intersectional analysis (Amelina and Lutz, 2019: 19; Leiprecht and Lutz, 2015; Lykke, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Should an intersectional analysis be limited to the interaction between the ‘Big Three’ (gender, race, and class) or were more categories relevant for understanding the workings of power? Other scholars studied ways to conceptualise the intersection itself, problematising the crossroads metaphor as looking suspiciously like the additive, separate systems approach that intersectionality had been designed to alleviate (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Still others worried that intersectionality was neglecting agency and social transformation by focussing too exclusively on the vulnerabilities and constraints produced by multiple identifications. Devon Carbado (2013), for example, has argued against restricting intersectional analysis to the most vulnerable, calling this a ‘race to the bottom’. In his view, this short-changes the critical potential of intersectionality by letting the most powerful; that is, white, affluent, heterosexual men, off the hook.

But possibly the most important, and certainly the most controversial, re-working of intersectionality centred around the meanings and importance of ‘race’. Particularly, in Europe, where intersectionality became extremely popular, both within and outside the academy, the issue of race and racism was a subject of considerable dispute. Some scholars worried that ‘race’ (like ‘gender’ and ‘class’) resonated differently in Europe because of the historical legacy of the Holocaust (Knapp, 2005). Others questioned the primacy of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ given the patterns of migration and widespread islamophobia in the wake of 9/11 which made categories like ethnicity, religion, national belonging, and tradition seem more essential for an intersectional analysis. Still others argued that the widespread denial of race and the effects of racism in Europe make them equally, if not more, important to any critical intersectional analysis in a European context (Erel et al, 2010; Lewis, 2013).

While we firmly believe theories—particularly those that address issues that are important to specific audiences—will travel and that such travel automatically involves appropriations, amendments, and changes of the original meaning, this does not mean that the result will be met with universal approval. The travelling of intersectionality has had a decidedly mixed reception, even generating what Jennifer Nash (2019) has called the ‘intersectionality wars’. Some have argued that intersectionality has been misunderstood, de-politicised, and even ‘colonised’ by white (European) feminists (Bilge, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). Gail Lewis (2013), for example, argues that intersectionality has not travelled ‘safely’ and has, during its journey, lost its connection with its intended subject and provenance: Black women and other women of colour. She condemned white European feminists for uncritically reproducing the assumption that in the contemporary European context ‘race’ has no analytic utility, characterising this as ‘an act of epistemological and social erasure’ aimed at denying and deleting the racist history of Europe and its current forms of expression (Lewis, 2013: 880). The Canadian sociologist Sirma Bilge (2013) complained that the appropriation of a ‘whitened intersectionality’ breaks its constitutive ties with critical race thinking. She claims that the fact that this has particularly happened in Europe is due to continental European feminists having a ‘certain propensity toward overly academic contemplation’ (pp. 411–413). These interventions have led to the quest to ‘rescue’ intersectionality from those who would misuse it and ‘return’ it to its original context of invention (Bilge, 2013;

Cho et al, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013). In her analysis of this debate, Kathy Davis has argued that without any doubt, ‘race’ is the pain point in these assessments of the transatlantic travel of intersectionality. In other words, the fear was that if ‘race’ would no longer be considered the master category in intersectional analysis, intersectionality would lose its critical edge (Davis, 2020: 121). Interestingly, the question of what should (or should not be) the master category of critical feminist analysis is also one that has haunted gender studies scholars in Germany. It was feared that the introduction of intersectionality would result in the loss of gender as master category, leading to a disavowal and weakening of gender studies that could easily be politically misused to abolish gender studies altogether (Bereswill and Neuber, 2011: 62; Rendtorff, 2008).⁵

In this volume, we have not shied away from critical debates about intersectionality, nor have we taken up the position that intersectionality is the only perspective for tackling issues of interlocking social inequalities and struggles for social justice. These debates are essential for the development of any critical perspective. However, we have tried to avoid unproductive name-calling and looked for ways to talk to one another across our differences. This volume offers fresh approaches to thinking critically about intersectionality and encouraging constructive debates about issues that are important to us all.

The Present Volume

This handbook was developed and written during the Coronavirus pandemic. This has had an enormous influence on all of the contributors, including on us as editors. We have had to contend with authors who had promised to contribute, but had to jump ship at the last moment because they were so overwhelmed with illness, or children at home, or endless online meetings. Almost everyone had difficulties writing during the pandemic and had to ask for extensions or—with lots of apologies—to submit very rough drafts. As editors, we found ourselves doing more support work than we had anticipated. We wrote reassuring letters. We offered to read and provide suggestions for the most preliminary of drafts. We extended deadlines and when they didn’t work, we extended them again. While this resulted in more work than we had signed on for, it was also rewarding. It felt much more like a communal project, where we were all working together and trying to accomplish something in the face of a shared crisis.

The present volume treats intersectionality as a work in progress—as a history that still needs to be explored, as a theory that has travelled and continues to be taken up and re-worked, as a field of studies that has spawned developments that are both exciting and disturbing, and as a catalyst for critical research and social justice. In short, intersectionality and its travels represent a phenomenon about which the last word has yet to be written. The authors come from different disciplines, and they adopt different theoretical and methodological perspectives to think about intersectionality. Some of them are superstars in the field whose work has inspired many of us. Others are younger scholars who have come to intersectionality more recently and provide fresh and often surprising insights based on their own interests and concerns. We have tried to broaden the usual national focus to include contributors from different parts of the globe, not just from the US where intersectionality originated, but from the UK and Northern Europe, Eastern Europe and farther afield to the Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America). We have asked contributors to think both locally and transnationally about intersectionality, bringing in their own ideas, reservations, and hopes.

The book is divided into six parts. It begins with a history of intersectionality and its travels to Europe, Central and Eastern Europe and the Global South. This is followed by some of the ways intersectionality has developed. These developments entail attempts to relate intersectionality to other critical theories (post-colonialism) or to extend its epistemological, theoretical and methodological scope or to make its political remit more global. In the third part, the debates and controversies surrounding intersectionality's travels and reception are explored. The contributors in this section endeavour to move beyond some of the stalemates and impasses that have characterised the 'intersectionality wars' (Nash, 2019), showing how we might learn from them and move forward. The next section provides a look at some of the ways intersectionality can be employed in empirical research. This is an issue which has confounded many intersectionality scholars who like the concept, but aren't sure how to use it in their own work. This section shows some of the different ways intersectionality can be used as a method or heuristic device that can help us do critical research on the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination. The final section returns to the roots of intersectionality in the law and social justice and shows how it has been mobilised in social activism, both in the past and in the present.

As editors of this book, we have sought to answer the question: which of our authors are critical or even doubtful in their evaluation of intersectionality as a *travelling theory* and which are positive? After considering the rich array of contributions, we have distinguished four lines of argumentation. The first is a scepticism regarding the transferability of the categories used in intersectional analysis to other parts of the globe. The second is a positive recognition of the concept's inherent transferability to other contexts. The third is a back-to-the roots argument that rejects extending or changing intersectionality and instead offers a plea for the re-evaluation of the original texts and the movements which inspired them. And, finally, a fourth line is a quest for more openness towards the metaphorical possibilities of intersectionality.

The sceptics doubt that intersectionality can ever fit every context. Its transmission to the Global South can only be accepted in conjunction with other conceptual frameworks, particularly post/decolonial or post-socialist theories. The transferability of the core categories (race-class-gender) to countries in the Global South or to the post-socialist countries has been called into question by Lyn Ossome, Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro-Varela, Kornelia Slavova and Rumiana Stoivola, Sylvanna M Falcon, and Celeste Montoya and Raquel Hernandez Guerrero in different ways in this volume. All of them raise questions whether theories originating in the US and Europe can be treated as *the* theory for understanding a multiplicity of discriminations and power relations in other parts of the globe. They insist on a critical interrogation of intersectionality and reject the idea that one theory is suitable for every context or constellation of power.

The majority of the authors of this handbook, however, are less prone to doubt intersectionality's usefulness in other contexts. Instead, they embrace the concept as one that has brought about much-needed discussions about racism, colonialism and enslavement to European shores. While Ann Phoenix, Nina Lykke, Nira Yuval Davis, Kathy Davis and Helma Lutz, Niels Spierings, Anna Bredström, Elisabeth Holzleithner, and Christa Biswanger have different approaches to using intersectionality, they all have viewed it as a source of inspiration for their research projects and found ways to make it work for them in theorising and investigating configurations of gendered and racialised power.

Other authors insist that we need to first look to the past and its connection to the present if we are to use intersectionality productively. They advocate travelling to the roots of intersectionality in the late 19th century. Vivian May and Vanessa Thompson return to the pioneers of original texts and the activities of the anti-slavery movement as important inspirations that are needed as correctives for current scholarship. Returning to the origins of intersectional thought helps us to read their presence through recent debates. Linda Gordon also sees the past—in her case, the US American women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s—as an important inspiration for contemporary social activism, and, in particular, the issue of how to form coalitions across differences. Barbara Giovanna Bello argues for a rereading of how the nexus of rupture and continuity in the civil rights and in the women’s movements of the past are echoed in the intersectional genealogies of the #BLM and #MeToo movements. And, finally, the chapters of Jennifer Nash, Amund Rake Hoffart, Ethel Tungohan, and Fernando Tormos-Aponte make a case for a new kind of openness in current debates about intersectionality, which avoids the contradictions between safe/unsafe or good/bad travel. Amund Rake Hoffart sees travelling as reinvention with new metaphors for intersectionality that beg to be explored. Jennifer Nash takes a novel look at ‘travel’ that is not so much geographical, but commercial. She perceptively analyses the emergence of tote bags and T-shirts with both their positive as well as their negative impacts on how we understand intersectionality. Ethel Tungohan and Fernando Tormos-Aponte embrace intersectionality in so far as it has travelled outside academia and become a central force in contemporary activism.

As Kathy Davis argues in the Epilogue, there is no guarantee that intersectionality will always and everywhere be taken up in a way that is universally acceptable. The genealogy of the term itself as well as the complexity of the debates underscore the importance of remaining critically vigilant toward how intersectionality is deployed within and outside the academy, and being prepared to engage with our own positionalities and blind spots. Thinking transnationally means being respectful of and learning from our differences. It is our hope that this handbook will inspire scholars and activists in different parts of the world, in different fields, both inside and outside the academy, to continue to elaborate, reinvent, and criticise what has rightfully been called feminism’s most famous travelling theory.

Notes

- 1 See: <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/>
- 2 <https://bij1.org/een-ongeregeld-zooitje-of-wat-is-intersectionaliteit/>
- 3 See, for example, the notions of ‘double’ or ‘multiple jeopardy’ by Frances Beale (2008) and Deborah King (1988) that refer to the additional barriers and burdens faced by individuals who are disadvantaged by race and class. Socialist feminists extended this perspective to include class in the ‘triple oppression theory’ (Lynn, 2014). See also, Linda Gordon in this volume.
- 4 Other feminist scholars have also been critical of this additive approach. See, for example, Hara-way (1991), Yuval-Davis (1991), and Puar (2012), just to name a few.
- 5 ‘Anti-genderism’ has become a disturbing force through Europe, supplying the common denominator and symbolic glue of ultra-right, populist movements (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

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