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**“WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES DIFFERENCE
MAKE?”:
DIVERSITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND
TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST POLITICS**

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To cite this article:

[Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro Varela, ““What Difference Does Difference make?”: Diversity, Intersectionality and Transnational Feminist Politics.” *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, 2016, vol. 16, pp. 11-39]

Abstract:

This paper engages with the formative concepts of diversity and intersectionality, inquiring how far they are employed as tools for achieving (gender) justice that open up spaces for marginalized constituencies, including racial and religious minorities, colonial subjects, queers, and women and how they unwittingly reify the hegemony of an entitled majority by failing to realize their emancipatory possibilities.

Intersectionality as corrective methodology

“What I find revealing in debates on intersectionality, even among its critics, is the total lack of engagement with

literature outside the Euro - North American (at most Australia)." (Menon, 2015, p. 11)

The pursuit of justice has been at the heart of feminist theory and practice. The aim was and is to examine the role of gender in processes of material exploitation and epistemic violence as well as to outline strategies that enable gender equality and access to and control over resources, thereby empowering the agency of disenfranchised individuals and communities. Moreover, the effort is to enable participation of vulnerable female citizens in social and political institutions, which are responsible for and accountable to them. Contemporary discourses on (gender) justice seek to address multiple aspects including theoretical discussions of agency, autonomy, and capabilities; political questions involving participation, rights, democratization, and citizenship; economic policies about access to and control over resources; issues of cultural politics and representation; discussions in the field of law about judicial reform; and practical matters of access to redress. Debates on justice are increasingly employing the model of intersectionality, which outlines how different forms of discrimination co-constitute each other, thereby producing particular conjunctures of vulnerability and inequality. Furthermore, the production of injustice is located in a range of interconnected socio-political institutions like the heteronormative family, the community, the market, and the state.

Against this background, our paper engages with the formative concepts of diversity and intersectionality, inquiring how far they are tools for achieving (gender) justice that open up spaces for marginalized constituencies, including racial and religious minorities, colonial subjects, queers, and women and how they unwittingly reify the hegemony of an entitled majority by failing to realize their emancipatory possibilities. We take inspiration from the postcolonial feminist Sara Ahmed (2006), who argues that the diversity and intersectionality

boom is for the most part “non-performative,” in that it promises much more than it actually delivers. This contribution outlines the prospects and limitations of intersectionality and diversity politics, by taking a step back and assessing what has been gained through these interventions, and where it has failed. As intersectionality and diversity are often discussed together, we focus on how these are mobilized in academic discourses and beyond and their strengths and limits. The text begins by engaging with the important contribution made by diversity and intersectionality discourses and outlines how these have enriched struggles for justice. Thereafter, we take a critical look at both approaches. Here we particularly focus on interventions from the global South, which are mostly disregarded within the Western debates on intersectionality and diversity politics. Finally, we argue that despite the critique, one cannot not want diversity politics and intersectional analysis, even as it is imperative to persistently question and be vigilant about the instrumentalization of these progressive tools by hegemonic discourses and structures to sustain the status quo.

Intersectionality and Diversity: Old wines, new bottles?

Whenever intersectionality and diversity are up for debate, one is often confronted with the question: What’s new about this approach? This is certainly not without good reason given that, as it has been rightly pointed out, they deal with forms and dynamics of discrimination that feminist theory and practice has been continuously reflecting upon and negotiating for over two decades. Perspectives may vary, yet the meticulous scrutiny of multiple facets of discrimination has always been a key feminist concern. At the same time, it is widely accepted that although all women experience discrimination on the basis of gender, they are not discriminated in the same way and degree. Even a cursory look at the second-wave feminist movement in the US in the 1970s reveals that with its sole focus on gender, it was already subjected to vehement critique for its racism and class bias. Various social and resistance movements (for example, the Black and lesbian movement) pointed out that categories such as race, sexuality, class,

religion, and so forth were not sufficiently taken into account in white feminist scholarship and advocacy. This resulted in an epistemological framework and theoretical categories that did not adequately reflect the experiences of different subject positions. The oft-quoted statement by the Combahee River Collective astutely indicts this oversight: “A combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism” (Combahee River Collective, 1984[1978], p.4). The assumption that *all* women were equally victimized by a global patriarchy was central to the critique. Such a viewpoint, which basically sums up the focus of the second-wave feminist movement, not only implies that all other power relations – such as racism and classism derive from patriarchy and correspondingly disappear with the victory over the same, but also suggest that sexism is a universal and transhistorical phenomenon. The U.S. feminists of color provided theoretical alternatives, in that they challenged the exclusive focus on a universal patriarchy that neglected other forms of discrimination (cf. Anzaldúa/Moraga, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1984). It is important to note that the alternative was not to simply “add and stir” other grounds of discrimination to sexism; rather the interrelations of diverse forms of discrimination and co-constitution of social categories were taken into consideration. Thus quite early – at least in the U.S. – a multi-issues feminism emerged that provided a corrective for mainstream feminist theory and advocacy that had previously limited itself to merely one category, namely, gender, even as it was a very reductionist idea of gender. Marginalized women, whose experiences of discrimination could not be sufficiently captured by single-issue politics, always questioned and challenged the foundational premises of feminism, even as they refashioned the tools that have constituted the arsenal of feminist scholarship. As is well-known, the formerly enslaved women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth gave a powerful statement on occasion of the women’s right convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 asking her “white sisters” “And ain’t I a woman?!”. To this day her intervention still inspires and informs (postcolonial) feminists supportive of an intersectional approach. Poststructuralist

feminists underline another serious theoretical problem, namely, single-issue politics not only erases and hierarchizes different forms of oppression, it also essentializes gender (see for example Butler, 1990).

In light of these considerations, a critique of hegemonic feminism must necessarily adopt a historical approach; otherwise it fails to produce a differentiated analysis of gender relations. In this context, the postcolonial feminist Sara Suleri (1995, p.273) pointedly raises the tricky question of what comes first: gender or race? She thereby outlines the radical inseparability of the two structuring categories that are ultimately reflected in the gendering of race and racialization of gender. This highlights how race and gender are historically interwoven, even as different moments of oppression conflict with each other (see in this regard Trinh, 1989). Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is credited with coining the term intersectionality, explains this as follows:

Because women of colour experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of colour and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252).

Crenshaw (1989), an African American legal theorist, points out that although the U.S.-American justice system safeguards the rights of women as well as of African American men, it insufficiently protects the rights of Black women. In the 19th century, Sojourner Truth emphasized precisely this aspect when calling for the voting rights of Black women at a time when this was only demanded for Black men.

These historical discussions might suggest that there is not anything absolutely new about intersectionality; rather old discourses are presented in a new package. However, this would be inaccurate as the intersectional approach does not simply smoothly insert itself into the postmodern project, which focuses on the multiplicity and fragmentary nature of

social identities. Rather it offers “race/class/gender feminists” a theoretically challenging methodology, while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of an additive approach that still plagues many feminist analyses. One of the most significant advantages of an intersectional approach is its commitment to not only feminist theory, but also critical practice or a practice of critique. The intersectional approach not only addresses differences and heterogeneity, but also seeks to overcome the pitfalls of single-issue politics, as proposed by Black feminist scholarship (Hill Collins, 1990). Thus an analysis is attempted that takes into consideration the varied experiences of diverse constituencies without losing sight of the simultaneity, contradictions, and interdependencies of these perspectives. Intersectionality, as legal doctrine, can thus be described as a critical project that allows contemporary feminist research to carefully discern heterogeneity of standpoints and yet be politically and academically efficacious.

Diversity has a slightly different focus, namely, on the plurality of social categories. Above all diversity politics is devoted to promulgating an agenda of action, which provides political and social guidelines for anti-discrimination advocacy and equal opportunity politics. At the same time, it shares the assumption with the intersectional approach that power has multiple sources and is understood to operate dynamically within social and political arenas. Accordingly, experiences of racism, sexism, ableism, or classism cannot simply be separately considered within different fields that exist in isolation of each other. It is impossible to bring together these varied perspectives at a later point, as they actually have a reciprocal – sometimes conflicting relation to each other. For instance, African American feminists, who contested sexism in their own community while challenging hegemonic white feminism and a white patriarchy, were in turn often accused of heterosexism by lesbian African American feminists (see Lorde, 1984). What is apparent is that without an adequate consideration of the complex intersections of factors such as class, gender, race, and sexuality, anti-discrimination policies risk reinforcing essentialist identity politics. This brings about counter-productive effects. In this context Angela Davis

provocatively speaks of diversity and intersectionality as “difference that makes no difference”.¹ She suggests that the presence of women or Black people in leading positions within universities, politics, or the free economy has not radically transformed social structures or gender and race relations. She points to the inefficacy of critical concepts that seem innovative within the academy, but in reality prove insufficient to facilitate social transformation. Here the key question is whether critical concepts are unable to deliver on their promises or whether hegemonic structures continually succeed in appropriating and de-radicalizing them.

Intersectionality in the Postcolony

The postcolonial theorist Anne McClintock (1995, p.5) proposes that race and gender are not simply a question of skin color or sexuality, but of exploitative sexual and economic relations and imperial servility. For slightly different reasons than intersectionality researchers, postcolonial feminists caution against reducing these complex fields to identity categories that ignores their interlocking and reciprocal character. From the standpoint of postcolonial feminists, imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of gender and race relations (cf. *ibid.*, p. 6), for since its emergence, colonialism has represented a violent encounter of Western and pre-colonial power hierarchies entailing an opportunistic overlapping of colonial and native patriarchal ideologies. For instance, colonized women were already at a disadvantage within their communities before the establishment of the imperial rule, which gave their experience of colonial sexual and economic exploitation a different quality in contrast to that of the oppression of native men. Not only did colonized women

¹ Angela Davis, *Feminism and Abolition: Theories & Practices for the 21st Century*, Public lecture at the Cornelia Goethe Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, Goethe-University Frankfurt on 03.12.2013.

have to deal with inequalities with regard to their “own men,” but they also had to negotiate violent structures of imperial power relations – with white European men *and* women (cf. *ibid.*). Postcolonial feminism is an effort to address diverse social differences without undermining the necessary solidarity across categories in processes of decolonization. Discourses of resistance can inadvertently reinforce essentialisms and reifications, even as former margins are transformed into oppositional centers (Gates, 1992, p.303).

As a recent debate among Indian feminists demonstrates, it is not a given that the concept of intersectionality is automatically relevant in postcolonial contexts or augments transnational feminist alliance-building. The question of who ultimately profits from this approach remains contested.² Nivedita Menon (2015), in her contribution in the renowned journal *Economic & Political Weekly*³ inquires whether the intersectional approach is meaningful in postcolonial contexts such as India. In doing so she initiated a robust discussion on the universal validity of feminist concepts – even when they function as critical tools. This revitalizes the crucial debate about the “politics of location” (Rich, 1986), which demands a critical contextualization of every political intervention. Even though Menon does not outright reject the concept of intersectionality, she sharply critiques its politics of reception. In her view, “[t]heory must be located, we must be alert to the spatial and temporal coordinates that suffuse all

² Even a cursory engagement, for instance, with the German scholarship on intersectionality reveals the dominance of white, heterosexual, bourgeois German feminists, whose effort seems to be to “catch up institutionally with U.S. women’s studies” (Puar, 2012, p.55). This is contrary to the Anglo-American context, wherein women of color initiated the discussions. Although we support an anti-essentialist politics of representation, it is imperative to address the following issues: How did the intersectional approach become hegemonic in Western feminist scholarship and who profits from its popularity? Is it agency-inducing for gendered subaltern subjects, in that it enables them to intervene and transform hegemonic structures? Or does the “First World” remain self-obsessed in the name of difference?

³ We are citing from *International Viewpoint*, an online socialist journal, where the text appeared simultaneous to its publication in the *EPW*.

theorizing” (Menon, 2015, p. 2), so that intersectionality must be considered within the context of an academic imperialism of categories. She draws attention to the dominance of concepts developed in the West, which are ‘imported’ into postcolonial spaces, while categories and concepts outlined by non-European intellectuals rarely travel in the opposite direction (ibid.). As previously pointed out by other authors, Menon too argues that intersectionality merely ends up being a buzzword for a long known fact. Focusing on India and the legacy of liberation struggles that among other things led to the emergence of an independent Republic of India, Menon employs several examples, like the issue of legal pluralism as well as caste politics, to insist that, on the one hand, India cannot be compared to the U.S and, on the other hand, how the co-constitution of categories has long been considered an unquestionable fact within Indian feminism. “My argument is,” Menon states, “that the ‘single axis framework’ was never predominant or unchallenged in our parts of the world” (ibid., p. 4). In her view, feminist politics in a context like India is unthinkable without the interventions of *Dalit*⁴ women. She discusses how *Dalit* activists for instance, reject radical feminist categories such as “sex work,” because these are unacceptable within a context where members of their community were forced into prostitution in the name of tradition. Striking a cautionary note *Dalit* scholars argue that the mobilization of the self-designation “sex work,” which suggests wage labor and free choice, trivializes historical relations of coercion maintained by the hegemonic upper castes in sexually exploiting vulnerable *Dalit* women. Menon uses this example to illustrate the interplay between gender, sexuality, class and caste to suggest that it was never possible to pursue single-issue politics in India. Furthermore, she reminds us of the appropriation of the concept of intersectionality by the UN, which has not only resulted in the de-radicalization of Crenshaw’s original concept, but also contributed to the de-politicization of gender studies in general. “In international human rights discourses, intersectionality

⁴ Dalit is the self-chosen designation by groups traditionally regarded as “untouchable” in the Hindu caste system.

helps perform the function of governmentalizing and depoliticizing gender, by assuming a pre-existing woman bearing multiple identities” (ibid, p. 9). This resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (2004) critique of human rights discourse, with which we will engage below. But before we do so, we would like to briefly outline two responses to Menon’s intervention: Mary John (2015) is skeptical about the claim that Indian feminist theory has always promoted a multi-issue politics. She is moreover unconvinced that Menon’s preferred strategy of destabilization of social categories would facilitate a more inclusive politics (ibid., p. 73). For John, the strength of an intersectional approach lies in its ability to make transparent the problem of multiple and overlapping discriminations “by pointing to a place where identities fail to appear or be recognized as we might have expected them” (ibid.). Here John supports the claim that intersectionality functions as a corrective methodology. John agrees with Menon on the problem of universalism and the assumption that any theory developed in the West can be applied everywhere, while non-Western concepts and theories are not guaranteed the same reception. She, however, suggests that simply rejecting all universalisms is not a viable solution:

It is true that, given our colonial and postcolonial histories, our intellectual spaces are cluttered with false universalisms. But it is equally true that we have been trapped by false particularisms, and ever false rejections of the universal. (ibid., p. 75)

In response to the critique that the concept of intersectionality is not radically new, John reminds us that Crenshaw never claimed this in the first place; rather Crenshaw always located her concept in the collective history of Black feminism in the US. Finally, Meena Gopal (2015) adds that Menon presents a very selective description of the Indian feminist movement and neglects the category of “class,” a common problem in contemporary feminist politics. Despite their differences, all the interlocutors agree that a discussion on the contribution of intersectionality in revitalizing feminist theory and politics is meaningful and fruitful. However, a simple “transplantation”

from the West onto the postcolonial contexts seems questionable and intellectually dubious. But as John remarks: “Above all else, then, there is a profound need for more critical dialogue across global feminist margins and centers. I, for one, think that intersectionality would make for an excellent candidate in such an endeavor.” (Menon, 2015, p.76).

Non-performativity of Diversity Politics

Despite the hype surrounding diversity as an emancipatory concept, the postcolonial feminist Sara Ahmed (2006) suggests that regrettably diversity politics mostly serves as mere lip service in academic and policy discourses. Examining institutional commitments to social change through implementation of diversity and equality programs, she identifies an effect she calls non-performativity of diversity speech. As Ahmed points out, the non-performativity of an utterance does not indicate its failure; rather its very success lies in not doing what it claims, even if it is read as performative, namely, as doing what it pledges. Although the discourses and guidelines surrounding diversity are not completely ineffective, nonetheless they do not necessarily lead to the effects they name and promise, but are still perceived as performative (Ahmed, 2006, p. 104). This generates power effects, in that the non-performativity can be applied and used strategically. The claim made by an institution or university that it is anti-racist or anti-sexist has the paradox effect, such that racism can no longer be criticized within such institutions. Immunized through the self-representation of being anti-racist and diversity-friendly, institutional racism and sexism becomes impossible to name thereby rendering discriminatory practices invisible and making them all the more difficult to contest. The effect is that the non-performative rhetoric prevents combatting that which it pretends to abolish. Ironically, anti-racist and diversity-friendly discourses can, at the same time, function as a resource for these struggles, because they enable the exposure of the gap between claim and practice. On one hand, naming and recognition of discriminatory and exclusionary structures is necessary in order to be able to even imagine equality and justice. On the other hand not every form of ritualized

distancing from racist or sexist practices fosters the elimination of inequality and injustice. Ahmed states that paradoxically the more the focus on diversity management in institutions such as universities, the less diverse these institutions seem to be. This negative relation between rhetoric and reality indicates the institutional farce performed in the name of diversity politics. An excellent example of this is the proliferation of seals of approval given to institutions to certify them as diversity-friendly. For instance, several evaluations have been introduced to assess the family friendliness of universities. This is essentially part of the marketing strategy towards corporatization and neoliberalization of universities (see Brown, 2015, pp. 175), which present themselves as cosmopolitan, transnational, and diverse as these credentials influence their international ranking. However, despite claims of “doing diversity” the status quo within universities is upheld via Eurocentric and androcentric structures. The rhetoric of diversity and equality is instrumentalized in order to circumvent the accusation of racism and discrimination. At the same time, there is a systematic resistance against the institutionalization of diversity, which would structurally entrench principles of gender and racial equality through changes in the curriculum as well as through more democratic hiring practices. Here we see the ideological function of diversity programs as legitimizing performance indicators (Ahmed, 2006). It is thus imperative to situate the “mainstreaming” of intersectionality politics and diversity management within the historical and economic landscape of neoliberal pluralism and global capitalism that consumes difference as an alibi so that it does not make a difference.

Interestingly, the group that profits most from diversity politics and gender mainstreaming is white, bourgeois, and heterosexual.⁵ Even as critical race theory, postcolonial studies,

⁵ A good example of this “institutional farce” is the research group “Black Knowledges” at the University of Bremen that focuses on *New Black Diaspora Studies*, but is an exclusively white initiative without participation of Black scholars. Similarly women of color, migrants, and trans*persons are under-represented at Gender studies centers that disproportionately employ bourgeois, white, heterosexual scholars worldwide. In India, for

diversity, intersectionality, migration, and globalization studies are increasingly core areas of feminist scholarship, the appropriation of knowledge of marginalized collectivities such as migrants and diasporic subjects in promoting the career of hegemonic groups is widespread. This prompts us to ask whether the highly celebrated discourses of diversity and intersectionality deliver equally to all constituencies or whether they function as an instrument for the differential distribution of rights and justice and as career making machines for intellectual elites. Interestingly, straight white men are increasingly staging themselves as victims of diversity politics, even as the pedagogical deployment of intersectionality in feminist scholarship results in re-securing the centrality of the subject positioning of white women (Puar, 2012, p. 52). Women of color, on the other hand, who were supposed to emerge as new subjects of feminism through intersectional analysis, are deployed as simply “articulating a grievance,” even as the category is emptied of its specific meaning through scholarly overuse (*ibid.*).

Another crucial question that needs to be addressed in this context is the status of different categories that are legacies of the modernist imperial project. Being a corrective methodology, one can ideally hope from intersectionality research and diversity strategies to overcome the normative violence inherent in categories such as gender or sexuality even as they mitigate the overemphasis on one category at the cost of neglecting others. Against the straightforward understanding of intersectionality as the analysis of simultaneous inequalities, it would be more meaningful to examine why specific inequalities are given more importance than others in specific moments in specific spaces. Accordingly, the analyses should explore the entanglements of different factors or categories, even as it makes visible how “gender” and “race” or “class and “race” function as conflicting categories of analysis, whilst some categories appear to be more salient than others in

instance, there is a growing nationwide pattern where dominant upper castes are increasingly demanding reservation benefits that were constitutionally allocated for marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

specific contexts. For example, the focus on caste within the Indian context is more relevant than race⁶ – and this is also pertinent for understanding the relations of power within the Indian diaspora. Similarly, categories such as “*First Nations*,” “*Native Americans*,” or “*pueblos originarios*” cannot be simply subsumed under the umbrella term “race” and even less under that of “migration”. Neglecting these nuances substantially distorts any examination of (historical) processes of discrimination. Similarly, an over-emphasis on “race” can lead to “class” being disregarded, as Gopal (2015) points out. Spivak explicitly cautions against solely focusing on race and (anti)-racism within the global North, as this does not automatically entail an engagement with the international division of labor, which she considers imperative (Spivak, 1990, p.126). She warns that such a narrow approach does not allow for a contestation of the complex strategies of economic, political, and social disenfranchisement within processes of decolonization:

I was trying to show how our lives, even as we produce this chromatist discourse of anti-racism, are being constructed by that international division of labor, and its latest manifestations are in fact the responsibility of class-differentiated non-white people in the Third World, using the indigenous structures of patriarchy and the established structures of capitalism. To simply foreclose or ignore the international division of labor because that’s complicit with our own production, in the interests of the black-white division as representing the problem, is a foreclosure of neo-colonialism operated by chromatist race-analysis. (Spivak, 1990, p. 126)

Along similar lines, postcolonial scholars caution that the focus on “race” as *the* prominent category within anti-

⁶ With the increasing migration from different African countries to India and repeated racist attacks against African students, tourists, and businessmen and women, the importance of ‘race’ in analyzing discrimination is on the rise.

colonial formations of resistance has meant that decolonization is equated with dismantling of racist structures and narratives. As Mahmood Mamdani rightly observes, the historical legitimacy of nationalist governments after decolonization was principally measured in terms of whether they initiated an effective de-racialization (Mamdani, 1996, p. 288). Mamdani reminds us that this resulted in “de-racialization without democratization,” for instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.). Framed as “indigenization program” or as “nationalization,” one of the primary aims was to dismantle the privileges that white colonizers had accumulated through racist and imperialist politics. Along similar lines, postcolonial regimes are critiqued for not adequately addressing pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial heteronormativities.

In contrast, the debate surrounding intersectionality is at risk of fetishizing the race-class-gender-mantra without paying attention to what issues are rendered invisible and excluded because of this mechanical repetition and Eurocentric reduction. It is no coincidence that the ritualized citation reminds one of the Christian holy trinity. Moreover, whenever the standardized list of categories is quoted, it either conceals other forms of oppression or freezes them into an “etcetera”. In addition, Davina Cooper (2004) states that the problem of an intersectional perspective also lies in losing sight of the co-constitution of identities and inequalities, which do not result from intersectional categories. The demand that the intersecting categories be outlined in a clear and orderly manner that is quantifiable and verifiable stems from the fear of having to engage with nebulous and messy dynamics of political power. Irritation and disorientation that result from dealing with the complexities of social injustice are seemingly tamed through strict methodological guidelines. Ultimately one can observe a comeback of not only a universalist perspective but also of essentialist tendencies.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler alludes to this when she mentions the almost embarrassing “etc.” at the end of the “list of categories” (cf. Butler, 1990, p. 143). Here the “etcetera” as punctuation mark can simultaneously be

interpreted as exhaustion and excess and should be the starting point for feminist self-critique. Once again universalist practices gain access through the backdoor by way of the dominant particular. This is why Butler clearly cautions against a politics that aims to create “positions” from where excluded groups can speak. Herewith she objects to a logic in which “positions” function as immaculate, coherent “categories” (Butler, 1993, pp. 111). In her view, the effort should not be to think race, sexuality, and gender in relation to each other *as if* they are “fully separable axes of power” (ibid., p.116). Rather, the theoretical proliferation of “categories” or “positions” should itself be questioned. Similar to Butler, Menon (2015) raises the question whether intersectional analysis should limit itself to analyzing marginalized and privileged positions or whether a more urgent and radical critical intervention necessitates a destabilization of the same.

Intersectionality versus Assemblage: The Politics of Positionality and Fluidity

An attempt to supplement intersectionality as a tool for political intervention is made by Jasbir Puar (2012), whose mobilization of the Deleuzian idea of assemblage⁷ offers a mapping of fleeting, de-centered, and unstable bodies as opposed to politics of intersectional subject positioning. Puar explains that “intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility” (2012, p. 50). While intersectionality deploys the subject as a primary analytic frame and is concerned with multiplicity of subject identity, assemblage is marked by openness for the unknown and indeterminate. As opposed to the fixity of categories, identities, representations, and naming that informs the intersectional approach, the concept of assemblage addresses

⁷ As Puar (2012, p. 57) explains, assemblage is not an assortment of things, nor is it a statement about states of affairs, rather it indicates practices, relations, connections, and patterning of energies, forces, and affects that give rise to concepts and content. It is more important to understand what assemblage *does* than what it *is*. Assemblage outlines the affective conditions necessary for the event-potential to unfold (ibid., p. 61).

the messiness and contingency of forces and practices. Although intersectionality and assemblage both work towards examining how subjects emerge as effects of specific historical, economic, social, cultural, and political conditions, unlike Crenshaw Puar does not stop at addressing the co-constitution of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ablebodiedness, but concerns herself with biopolitics. Instead of analyzing difference in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or even the category 'human,' the focus is on temporality, corporeality, and affect. In contrast to the intersectional attention to the political identity of women of colour, the Deleuzian notion of assemblage is about the fluid entanglements between disparate and multiple elements that are jumbled together without being neatly organized. There is no organic whole, but rather lines of articulation, segmentarity, strata, territories, flight, and movements of destratification and deterritorialization (ibid.). Assemblage is unattributable, namely, multiplicity without attributes that deprivileges positionality. Identities are considered to be multicausal, multidirectional, and liminal. Instead of bodies with identifiable gender, race, or other characteristics, the focus is on becoming, intensity, acceleration, rupture, and speed. Assemblage is marked by constant transformation, wherein properties of the constituent elements disappear and emerge in other forms. There are no underlying organizational principles, rather corporeality and embodiment is constituted through registers of consolidation.

In place of the intersectional focus on the additive power of discrimination or disenfranchisement, assemblage, through analysis of the capture of movement and controlling lines of flight, examines how stratified, hierarchical spaces and inequalities are created (ibid.). While the intersectional analysis ends up explaining identity in terms of a finite set of combinations of various recognized categories, assemblage identities are subversively unintelligible, thereby enabling interventions outside the normative frames. Empirical approaches understandably favor policy-friendly intersectionality to assemblage theory, for the former offer neat categories in which a combination of traits can help understand social phenomena, while the latter frustrate straightforward data

collection and analysis. In response to the doubts about the political applicability of assemblage theory in contrast to the usefulness of intersectionality as a successful tool for social and scholarly transformation, Puar (2012, p. 50) upholds the efficacy of nonrepresentational, non-subject-oriented politics as proposed by Gilles Deleuze. Another important critique of intersectionality from the perspective of assemblage theory is its “problematic reinvestment in the humanist subject” (Puar, 2012, p. 55). This intervention questions whether “the marginalized subject is still a viable site from which to produce politics, much less whether the subject is a necessary precursor for politics” (ibid.) and whether new forms of exclusions are produced in the process of promoting inclusion through the determination of identity through discourses of difference. In “de-exceptionalizing” human subjectivities and bodies (Puar, 2012, p. 57), the performativity of politics is framed beyond human agency. Rather than understanding subjectivity in terms of embodied identities, categories like race, gender, sexuality become encounters, variations, and arrangements between bodies that emerge through processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (ibid.).

While Puar is critical of the narrowness of the representation politics of intersectionality and the identitarian interpellations it invokes, Kathy Davis argues that “intersectionality promises feminist scholars of all identities, theoretical perspectives, and political persuasions that they can “have their cake and eat it, too”. (Davis, 2008, p. 72). In contrast to Davis, who emphasizes the strengths of intersectional approaches, we would like to draw further attention to some negative aspects that indicate an impossible desire for “one size fits all” diagnosis. Davis argues that intersectional approaches initiate a “discovery process,” which not only promises new critical insights, but is ongoing and thus potentially never-ending (ibid.). However, in our view, the global North remains the key point of reference around which critique is formulated, and thus the perspective remains Eurocentric. Categories such as sexuality and class are marginalized, although they form important organizing principles for processes of decolonization. All in all, it can be

said that the perfunctory repetition of the race/class/gender formula constitutes a problem of universalism and therefore one of depoliticization of critical interventions.

This raises the following questions: Who profits from intersectionality and diversity politics? Do they, for example, give subalternized subjects the opportunity to intervene in hegemonic structures or do they instead reify dominant academic discourses and political practices? Does this not end up with the global North once again being self-absorbed in the guise of justice?

Especially the coalescing of intersectionality and interdependence theories can be politically risky in that it neglects the transnational dimension of inequality and injustice. The interdependence approach refers to the reciprocal dependency of nation states, particularly with regard to their economic structures. The other question that needs to be addressed is whether the focus on identities is at the expense of neglecting structures. The aim here is not to revive the old debate between recognition versus redistribution or give priority to political economy over cultural practices. For it is obvious that reductionist economic analyses are just as problematic as “mere” cultural perspectives. No collective “only” suffers from economic exploitation just as no collective is “only” victim of cultural oppression. Furthermore recognition should not be understood as a goal in itself with no link to the question of redistribution. Our approach neither rejects intersectionality or diversity nor does it favor class politics over race, gender, or sexuality. Hierarchizing political fields would be counter-productive, even as stringent intellectual contemplation of the function of different categories within contemporary geopolitics is urgent. Here it is important to take Crenshaw’s warning seriously when she advises that: “Intersectionality should not become a

competition between those claiming oppression”.⁸ Spivak similarly remarks:

To see the problem of race simply in terms of skin color does not recognize that the only arena for that problem is the so-called white world, because you are focusing the problem in terms of blacks who want to enter and live in the white world, under racial laws in the white world. That obliges us to ignore the fact that in countries which are recognized as Third World countries, there is a great deal of oppression, class oppression, sex oppression, going on in terms of the collusion between comprador capitalists and that very white world. The international division of labor does not operate in terms of good whites, bad whites and blacks. A simple chromatism obliges you to be blind to this particular issue because once again it's present in excess. (Spivak, 1990, p. 126)

The critical impulses offered by intersectional approaches are politically important, as pointed out by even critics like Puar. This is why it is necessary to explore their limitations in order to revitalize them. In light of our entangled histories and futures, it is politically naïve to locate political responsibility within national boundaries. Despite various efforts to overcome the economic determinism and understand power and oppression from a multi-dimensional perspective, the intersectional approach and diversity politics fail precisely because they disregard transnational dimensions of social inequality as a legacy of colonialism. This leads us to the challenges of operationalizing intersectionality and diversity in the context of undoing injustice and inequality domestically as well as globally.

⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw at the conference “Celebrating Intersectionality?”, Goethe University Frankfurt on 23.01.2009.

Righting wrongs

From a postcolonial perspective, the notions of gender justice and equality, which are key norms of intersectionality and diversity politics, are embedded within historical processes of righting past wrongs, even as they frame contemporary discourses of development politics and human rights (see Spivak, 2004). These norms determine what qualifies as unjust and what mechanisms and tools are considered adequate to undoing wrongs. They also determine who is heard and who has the power to refuse to listen (see Spivak, 1994/1988; also Castro Varela/Dhawan, 2015, pp. 186).

Different understandings of the means for achieving gender justice and equality impose competing roles and expectations on national and international actors and organizations (ibid.). On the one hand, the state is increasingly being replaced by non-state actors like international NGOs and representatives of social movements, who enjoy a high level of legitimacy in the international public sphere to globally monitor issues of human rights abuses. On the other hand, it is argued that the state is indispensable for redistributive justice even as it should be held responsible for protecting its citizens. Varying interpretations of the role of governments, international organizations, and civil society actors produce very different strategies for gender justice such as empowerment of vulnerable persons through enabling political participation or economic self-sufficiency through provision of micro-credits or gender mainstreaming. Understanding the ideological and cultural legitimization for subordination of vulnerable groups within each arena can help identify how to overcome injustice.

An intersectional approach unfolds how justice in the realm of gender politics is not just a question of equality between the sexes; it also includes other factors like race, class, religion, and able-bodiedness, to name a few. This implies that women (or men) cannot be identified as a coherent or homogenous group. Instead, gender cuts across all social categories, producing different conceptions of justice. As pointed out by postcolonial scholars, processes of justice –

economic, social as well as political – go hand in glove with processes of democratization and decolonization, which must be framed transnationally. In summary, the question of decolonization must neither be limited to anti-racist politics in the global North nor a celebration of diversity, plurality, and difference in the metropolis. Otherwise diversity politics ends up being a catchy “feel good” marketing strategy (as with “United Colors of Benetton”), which makes sure that differences don’t make a difference. At the same time, stringent criticism and rigorous introspection will make transparent the blind-spots implicit in an intersectional approach against the backdrop of current structures of global interdependence and contemporary geopolitics. Nowadays it should be impossible to imagine a critical political practice that does not take the global dimensions of social inequality into account. Despite varied efforts to understand power and domination from a multi-dimensional perspective, the intersectional approach at times fails at meeting this challenge, because of its disregard of transnational dimensions that are a direct consequence of colonialism (Castro Varela, 2015, pp. 298). In our view the predominant focus on metropolitan spaces within academic debates on intersectionality and diversity can be read as symptomatic for an implicit Eurocentrism. In contrast to Menon’s critique, which stresses the non-transferability of concepts and disregard of postcolonial contexts, we consider it problematic that the structural effects of international labor division and the overexploitation of third world gendered labor is inexcusably neglected within debates on intersectionality. In light of the focus on the global scope of justice, the political challenge we face, in our opinion, requires a rethinking of a methodological nationalism, which follows the “assumption that nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer/Glick-Schiller, 2002, p. 302). The global North and the global South are interwoven within a context of economic interdependence, which is characterized by a power asymmetry and a history of imperialism. It is therefore urgent to problematize the production of dominant epistemologies and methodologies, which privilege the perspectives of the global North that are a consequence of neocolonial systems of power. At the same time, the everyday

situation of vulnerable subjects within the global South, for example, the daily experiences of oppression and exploitation of *Dalit* women in India, as mentioned by Menon, are overlooked. It is imperative to apply a postcolonial historical perspective that takes macro-economic structures into account in order to understand and analyze how current dynamics of global interdependence have emerged and the challenges they bring with them. It neither suffices to list diverse grounds of discrimination without employing a historical as well as transnational perspective, nor is it helpful to uncritically conjure transnational alliances or to simply push for a subversion of social categories, in the hope that once we overcome differences, they will stop making a difference. This is the promise made by the free market as well as populist politics, namely, that we live in a post-feminist, post-racial world. As evidence we are offered examples of successful men and women, both black and white, as proof of effective diversity politics.

If colonialism was marked by economic exploitation, political domination, undermining of indigenous socio-political institutions, and deprecation of non-European epistemologies, neo-colonialism has ushered in economic and social restructuring globally. In light of this, the tools that have constituted the arsenal of postcolonial feminist scholarship need to be refashioned. Although feminist initiatives are increasingly transnational, the notion of “women’s interest” shared by all regardless of race, class, religion, and nationality has led to advocating general solutions to global problems, which are seen to apply to all women universally. Gender programs for transnational justice often represent Third World women as “in need of help,” thereby legitimizing external intervention. Insofar as Western feminists have participated in these kinds of universalizing political discourses and denied the possibility of non-Western forms of gender justice, they have contributed to reinforcing the Eurocentric bias in the pursuit of justice, whilst holding on to a form of solidarity that reinforces established hierarchies.

Spivak reproaches Western feminists like Martha Nussbaum for appropriating “Third World” women’s narratives in order to find a “philosophical justification for universalism;” rather than being open to the other, Nussbaum brings “the other into the self” (Spivak, 2004, pp. 567-8). Emphasis on an ever-expanding catalogue of rights is dangerously confused with empowerment of third world women. The problem of the universalization of human rights is particularly visible in the domain of gender rights. The main issue here is that women’s rights discourse essentializes “local culture”. CEDAW, for example, takes Western rights as modern and per se emancipatory, while locating the source of “Third World” women’s oppression mainly in the domain of traditional cultural practices, legitimizing the idea that modernity frees them. Violence against women is fetishized, reinforcing notions of barbaric and patriarchal African, Hindu, or Islamic traditions (Kapoor 2008, pp. 35).

The culturalization and individualization of women’s rights diverts attention from broader questions of global structural inequality. While human/gender rights are being promoted by Western development organizations, many Western governments have a history of supporting brutal, authoritarian regimes in the global South. Moreover, it is important to note that many human/gender rights violations are the direct result of structural adjustment policies, promoted by some of the same donors that now dispense human rights (Kapoor 2008, pp. 36). States’ flaunting of rights by banning unionization, disciplining women workers, supporting child labor, allowing lower-than-minimum wages, turning a blind eye to toxic working conditions, and cutting food and education subsidies are all legacies of neoliberal adjustment policies. Thus ironically even those development agencies, which are critical of structural adjustment, for instance human rights NGOs, end up reinforcing neo-colonialism when they uncritically promote liberal-universalist human rights (Castro Varela, 2011; Dhawan, 2014). The rights agenda serves to consolidate the institutional power of international organizations, while functioning as an alibi for strategic or

military intervention, often under the pretense of “responsibility to protect” (Spivak, 2004).

The critique of what one cannot not want

In our opinion the future of anti-discrimination and global justice politics lies in an “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, 2012), a strategy that transforms the instruments of the dominant discourse into tools for its transgression. Despite its implicit non-performativity, diversity and intersectionality politics remain indispensable: “we cannot not want them” (ibid, p. 4). Accordingly, instead of a categorical rejection of the ideologies of the rights-bearing subject, we plead for a reconfiguration and supplementation of norms that inform these approaches by inquiring into what is prior to and beyond what is recognized as legitimate political subjectivity. Furthermore, the deployment of a transnational perspective, which is historically informed, is imperative. We need to confront the paradox that whenever categories are listed with the aim of providing a comprehensive analysis of varied grounds of discrimination or exclusion, this itemization risks concealing certain moments of oppression that are not adequately reflected by these inventories. There is the danger of inadvertently homogenizing and essentializing messy social identities, experiences, and practices. What is urgently needed is a deconstructive vigilance with regard to both the categories as well as the frames of analysis. Political interventions need to be context specific even as they must overcome “methodological nationalism” to encompass both the local and the global. They should proffer strategies of resistance without disavowing that resistance produces its own registers of exclusion and appropriation. And finally, as Menon rightly points out: “The subject of feminist politics has to be brought into being by political practice”. Here intersectionality and diversity can make an important contribution if conditions of non-performativity can be overcome.

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