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To Tell the Truth and Not Get Trapped: Desire, Distance, and Intersectionality at the Scene of Argument

Intersectionality has become a key concept for social justice advocates and socially conscious scholars in feminist studies, critical race studies, queer studies, sociology, and many other fields. Emanating from Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1989) interpretation of a specific problem facing Black women plaintiffs in employment discrimination cases and situated in a strong tradition of Black feminist argument, it has served as a frame, heuristic, and tool for a variety of analyses and arguments, traveling across discourses and disciplines, countries and contexts, and taking on many different meanings in diverse situations. Thus, it is not surprising to encounter competing claims about who owns the concept, how it functions in different disciplinary contexts, and exactly what kinds of practices it both enables and inhibits. In this article, I explore how uninterrogated scholarly and social conventions and habits of argument lead to distorted and destructive critiques of intersectionality that are damaging to feminist antisubordination scholarship and activism.

Scholars across the disciplines use intersectionality in vastly different and divergent ways and for different purposes. The unevenness of theories, methods, and goals across the disciplines; the range of disciplinary conventions and truth tests; and disagreements about the nature and purpose of research shape rhetorical moves at the scene of argument. The scene of argument is a much more important site for feminist praxis than is often acknowledged. It is at the scene of argument that we can examine how the relationship between intersectionality and its critics is actually produced and how it emerges from the practical forms of production, exchange, and consumption that are already in place within the institutions we inhabit.[1] While criticizing larger cultural discourses, feminist scholars often view our own practices of reading and writing as conventional and transparent; we can fail to acknowledge and examine how our arguments are always already situated within fields of power. Framing academic and

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[1] I draw here on a phrase from Sara Ahmed (2000).

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political discussions in commonsense ways treats rhetoric as a neutral technology to be deployed or evaluated in isolation from its conditions of production and the situations of speakers. Yet feminist rhetorics can absorb uninterrogated and deeply gendered and racialized models of textuality, argument, authorship, and evidence. As Louis Althusser (1971) argues, concrete individuals become constituted as subjects through ideology, but the most powerful ideological influences do not come to us in the form of ideological pronouncements. Such pronouncements would be visible, controversial, and refutable. Instead, he argues, the most powerful ideologies exist in apparatuses (in practices), and these practices are always material. Reading, writing, and arguing are material social practices laced with ideologies of legitimacy and propriety so powerful and pervasive that we presuppose their value rather than examining their effects. If feminists become arguing subjects through material practices that we have not sufficiently examined—as I argue to be the case—then we need to transform the terms of reading and writing to take responsibility for the ways feminist discourses can function as technologies of power.

Discursive technologies of power encourage affiliation with dominant discourses through complex means of identification and repudiation. General societal and disciplinary power relations give utterances that are friendly to prevailing power relations an overdetermined reasonableness while rendering most oppositional arguments automatically suspect. Even in feminist discourses, conventional social or disciplinary criticisms infused with such overdetermined reasonableness can serve to circumscribe and control the unruliness of oppositional critique. The philosophy of the humanities and social sciences encourages a discomfort with analyses of power, particularly racial power (Robinson 2007). Studies of language help structure social relations along hierarchical lines to control social disorder (Bauman and Briggs 2002). A long tradition of sociological research treats social problems as aberrant interruptions of fundamentally prevailing values, norms, and structures, promoting reformist rather than radical critiques of racism and sexism while rendering the discipline more focused on race and gender relations than race and gender justice (Lyman 1993). An emphasis on classification in the biological and social sciences originated in overtly racist frameworks rooted in assumptions about the superiority of some classes of people over others (Gulbenkian Commission 1996; Guthrie 2004; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008). Liberal Enlightenment thought generally treats the specific standpoints of women and people of color as parochial and provincial while defining Euro-American white masculinity as universally important and interesting (Noble 2002). Charles W. Mills (1997) argues that the absence of race from philosophical discourse is not aberrant or accidental but constitutive of the discipline. Intimacy with the world is not seen as theoretical; philosophy reduces practical injustice to a lower level of thought and elevates discussion of ideal categories to a higher level. Because of this history, some critiques of intersectionality unwittingly deploy strategies that serve to subdue and depoliticize intersectionality's originating radical critique of structural power. We cannot evade completely the ingrained ideologies of the disciplines, but neither can we embrace them uncritically. Analyzing them and criticizing them, however, enables us to see how often-unstated assumptions promote specific rhetorical strategies that entail the manipulation and replication of gendered and racialized hierarchies. These strategies can serve as potent tools of dominance, infusing the reading situation with strategies of subordination that go unremarked because they are authorized by tradition and convention.

Examining how academic feminists become arguing subjects reveals that discourses at the scene of argument are part of what constitutes an academic feminist public (on constituting publics, see Warner 2002, 16). The academic texts we read and write—and our activities reading and writing them—are material social practices that shape what counts as academic feminism. Feminist academic discourses are a node in a network of communications structured in dominance, whether or not we desire them to be so. Like other discourses, feminist academic discourses interpellate, hail, or call out to us as if we are certain kinds of feminist subjects, their efficacy based on their citation of certain prior and authoritative practices (see Butler 1997). They have indirect effects whether they are intended for us or not, whether we receive them or not, and whether we resist them or not. Through this barrage of hailings we come to understand what is obvious, what goes without saying, and what counts as coherent. The dominant reading is reinforced through its ideological intelligibility, even if a reader is critical of it (see Mills 1995). Thus, it is not merely theories and arguments judged to be of high quality that create and influence feminist publics. Weak claims, faulty arguments, and the habits of argument they display shape feminist subjects and subjectivities. Feminist knowledge practices and critical performances serve as "socializing pedagogies" (Wiegman 2010, 83). Arguments are social sites where academic feminism is articulated, learned, legitimated, and modeled.

At the scene of argument we see how critics produce what intersectionality has been and what it should be. The scene of argument is more than a container holding the important parts of feminist argumentation—theories, claims, and methods. Distinguishing between good or bad arguments and good or bad theories are important judgments to make. Yet the scene of argument also needs to be analyzed and understood. Our practices of writing proceed through patterned acts of argumentation, fully immersed in the social history of language, deploying words and forms that have been "completely taken over," as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, "shot through with intentions and accents" (1981, 293). Feminists cannot escape the use of patterned language, claims, and arguments, but we can insist on looking more closely at the scene of argument in order to determine how conventionalized framing rhetorics and tropes serve us badly when they are presented as convincing rhetorical moves that gain purchase by undermining radical critique.

Leslie McCall has described intersectionality as perhaps "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (2005, 1771). Ange-Marie Hancock hails intersectionality for its utility in helping scholars produce comprehensive answers to questions about distributive justice, power, and government activity (2007a, 248). Rita Kaur Dhamoon credits intersectionality with opening up a conceptual space that makes it possible "to study how various oppressions work together to produce something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone" (2011, 231). Indeed, an extraordinary body of work has provided original and generative deployments of intersectional conceptions to demonstrate how politics define identities, rather than identities defining politics. Drawing on arguments about history, difference, flexibility, fluidity, specificity, and multiplicity, scholars argue that gender- and race-based antisubordination struggles do not flow organically from shared physical features but rather emerge in efforts to imbue complex embodied identities with dynamic political meanings.[2]

Many critics approach intersectionality carelessly, however, through metacommentary and complaint and through recommendations to bring its radical critique under control by advocating recourse to specific disciplinary methods—without acknowledging that such methods may have long been criticized for their service to dominant discourses. Critics assume that their task is *to critique intersectionality*, not *to foster intersectionality's ability to critique* subordination. The rhetorical frameworks and tropes examined here misrepresent the history and arguments of intersectionality, treat it as a unitary entity rather than an analytic tool used across a range of disciplines, distort its arguments, engage in presentist analytics, reduce intersectionality's radical critique of power to desires for identity and inclusion, and offer a deradicalized intersectionality as an asset for dominant disciplinary discourses. The frequent use of such argumentative strategies truncates our ability to consider clearly potential concepts of intersectionality. It also hobbles the development of feminist and antiracist arguments. Rather than generating new challenges, these critiques of intersectionality often structure themselves through conceptual binaries that have long been criticized for oversimplifying the complex, dialogic, flexible, and even contradictory relations inherent to arguments about antisubordination. They repeatedly present "strains of particularism versus univeralism, personal narrative versus grand theory, identity-based versus structural, static versus dynamic, parochial versus cosmopolitan, underdeveloped versus sophisticated, old versus new, race versus class, US versus Europe, and so on" (Crenshaw 2011b, 222–23).

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[2] See, e.g., James (1996), Lowe (1996), Cohen (1997), Connolly and Patel (1997), Davis (1997), Maira (2000), Sandoval (2000), McCall (2001), Fregoso (2003), Hawkesworth (2003), Rodríguez (2003), Fujino (2005), Maxwell (2006), Smith (2006), Barvosa (2008), Lee (2008), Rose (2008, 2013), Cho (2009), Hernández (2010), Blackwell (2011), Crenshaw (2011a), Reddy (2011), Tapia (2011), and Roberts (2012).

Rhetorical misrepresentations of intersectionality emerge in part from professional pressures, reward structures, and credentialing mechanisms. Scholars are eager to publish. Displacing and supplanting previous knowledge conforms to the structures of professional reward. Scholars may exaggerate criticisms to draw on the prestige of the appearance of novelty and innovation in ways that are destructive rather than constructive and competitive rather than contributive. Editorial decisions at the site of publication play an important role here. As Lauren Berlant argues, "To decide to publish something is to confirm that it has made a case for its worthiness as knowledge" (2007, 671). Journals and presses may fail to see that what appears to be a lively or controversial article in fact replicates widespread and systematic misrepresentations of intersectionality. Academic journals are part of a training pipeline that includes graduate student cultures, presentations at professional meetings, and prestige hierarchies that spread word-of-mouth approval and disapproval. These sites function to produce what counts as critique and what defines the safest and most satisfying ways to deliver it. Unarticulated fears and social dangers pervade academic culture. Graduate students learn to rely on reading practices that attack and disparage texts rather than analyzing them. Because universities are class-based institutions that privilege managerial perspectives, critics of prevailing power relations trained in these academies can come to see their proper role as managing the opposition. The practices of consumption and connoisseurship that saturate social relations in this society teach people that it is dangerous and humiliating to be out of date and out of fashion. Consequently, expressing *dislikes* may appear safer than expressing *likes*, a preference that David Riesman long ago connected to consumption practices. In a study of consumers of popular music, he found that "enthusiasm would seem to be a greater social danger than negativism: The fear is to be caught liking what the others have decided not to like" (1950, 369). Scholars do not leave these practices behind when they leave graduate school. As a result they may deploy inadequate modes of argument that do not contribute well to feminist knowledge production.

The rhetorical frameworks and tropes analyzed here represent more than normal or even problematic scholarly efforts at correction and improvement. They make symptomatic moves emanating from the difficulties of feminist thought and action. In fields focused on power and subordination like feminist studies, queer studies, disability studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies, impatience with prevailing paradigms is understandable and can even be salutary. Yet it is easy to lose perspective. As Robyn Wiegman explains, feminism proceeds from and promotes desires to change the world (2010). It can be frustrating to hold political aspirations that have not yet been realized. Feminists reject sexist hierarchies yet endure them on a daily basis. The political desires that feminism ignites and stokes produce a necessary dissatisfaction with the status quo. That dissatisfaction, however, can easily be turned on feminism itself because it has not yet successfully changed the world. The torment of hope makes disappointments and defeats hard to endure, generating a *desire for distance* from prevailing paradigms, concepts, and theories that seem tainted with failure. In search of a new and untainted feminism, Wiegman argues, feminist criticism can too quickly discard still-useful concepts and categories, replacing them with "new objects and analytics in hopes of making its investments come true" (83). While changing the world is indeed a feminist goal, it can be undermined by the rhetorical moves examined here. These critiques use rhetorics and tropes framed by the desire to distance: they produce a rendition of intersectionality tainted by flaws and failures, justifying the critics' distance and their promotion of "new objects and analytics." The desire to distance interpellates us—whether we resist or not—as certain kinds of subjects, with consequences for the life we inhabit together as feminists. It also distracts our attention from what it means for feminist studies to remain silent or passive when such inadequate criticism discredits our small store of tools for radical critique.

Frameworks and tropes

Several key rhetorical frameworks and tropes deployed in criticizing intersectionality interpellate feminist subjects as those who desire a new and more successful feminism based on distance from allegedly flawed tools, concepts, and arguments. Of particular concern is the willingness to revise or jettison intersectionality as if it has little value to the continuing struggle against subordination.

Four key rhetorical frames reflect critics' desires to create distance from intersectionality: first, *Rhetorics of Rejection and Replacement*; second, *Rhetorics of Rectification*; third, *Rhetorics of Regulation*; and finally, *Rhetorics of Reduction*. Part of the narrative and affective power of these rhetorical frames derives from their marshaling of conventional tropes of counterargument characteristic of a broad range of academic discussions of social identities and power. Among these tropes are, first, *It Reinscribes What It Claims to Redress* and, second, *It Is Insufficiently Deferential to Privileged White Men*. These rhetorical frames and conventional tropes are what classical rhetoric would call commonplaces, habits of thought commonly shared by members of an academic audience. These are terms of criticism that are always already available to deploy against antisubordination arguments, especially those, like intersectionality, that are concerned with race and gender. They are steeped in ways of conceiving argument that have been and will be antithetical to antisubordination efforts. These modes of argument are discursive technologies of power structured in dominance to support conceptual and disciplinary occlusions and exclusions of race and gender.

These tropes interpellate us as neoliberal competitive academic disciplinary subjects (Davies and Bansel 2007, 2010). Neoliberalism works to reshape arguments about identity and structural power: rather than making the personal political, it makes the political personal. Framing identities as simply personal encourages critics to issue orders and requests about which identities should be important to intersectionality on the basis of their own desires. Critics may argue, for example, that intersectionality should be set free from the identities of the marginalized women of color who originated it.[3] Critics may claim that intersectionality has not yet revealed as much as it ought to about identities or has not examined the most important identities, one's own identity, enough identities, too many identities, or identities in a complex enough way (Staunæs 2003; Prins 2006; Taylor, Hines, and Casey 2011). They may assume that intersectionality is legitimated by an individual's conscious awareness and balancing of individual aspects of identity rather than revealing structures of power (Carastathis 2008; Weston 2011). In consequence, critics may assume, rather than argue, that eliminating subordination is no longer necessary or no longer a feminist goal (Hancock 2007a; Nash 2008), treating intersectionality's originating interest in structural power as readily disposable and self-evidently no longer of concern. Critics may even argue as if intersectionality's critique of structural power interferes with its more important use for developing general theories of identity (Prins 2006; Nash 2008). Diminishing the role of power in identity formation, such critics demonstrate a desire for individual self-invention, as if history and power no longer have claims on us, as if the significance of identities lies in expressions of subjectivity. For scholars concerned with antisubordination, however, the experience and subjectivity of specific identities is not really the focus of the argument but rather a proxy or tool to examine and counter structural injustice and subordination. Which meaning of identity we are interested in *depends on the work we want our work to do.*

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[3] See Staunæs (2003), Prins (2006), Hancock (2007a), and Nash (2008).

Our unremitting interpellation by neoliberal discourses explicitly focuses on changing the way we think of individuals and power. Neoliberal modes of competitive argument encourage us to value claims of error as much as or more than actual evidence of it and to gain satisfaction from making claims of error as a means of denying, diminishing, defeating, or dispatching arguments. They encourage us to treat our hard-won antisubordination arguments facilely, as dispensable and fungible, as just like any other argument, and as emerging from limitless resources, always ready to be refreshed from a well of better and more successful oppositional frames, theories, and tools. Using taken-for-granted conventional tropes to disparage and misrepresent antisubordination arguments such as intersectionality is not simply making bad arguments: it is allowing disciplines based on excluding race and gender to control the ways we think about and discuss antisubordination theories, tools, and arguments.

Rhetorical frames

Rejection and replacement

Rhetorics of rejection and replacement operate as a matched set. First, rhetorics of rejection are used to argue that the old intersectionality is flawed and that in consequence it must be removed as a feminist alternative because it has not yet met feminism's political desires. Then, rhetorics of replacement are used to offer a new site or theory to rejuvenate feminist political desire. This dual move operates according to a unifying logic, as though multiple fields of feminist antiracist analysis are not possible and as though any promising new category or analytic must be a singular path to feminist knowledge, a singular site of political investment. The rhetorics work together to suggest that developing the promise of any other kind of feminist analysis depends on clearing the deck, destroying the possibility that intersectionality might stand in the way of or compete with them for our political investments.

One critic condemns intersectionality in order to authorize transnational feminism as a renewed analytic for our investment (Carastathis 2008). This rhetoric of rejection and replacement echoes a long-standing practice in the history of feminist scholarship to promote transnational feminism over the work of American feminists of color—particularly African American women (Coogan-Gehr 2011). In the critic's argument, transnational feminism demonstrates a superior understanding of power, attending to "global relations of domination which produce social contradictions" (Carastathis 2008, 28). Specifically erased is intersectionality's own long history of analyzing "relations of domination which produce social contradictions." At the scene of argument, intersectionality is framed as inattentive to power, allowing the critic to privatize claims of racial difference: Black women are simply a special interest group excessively concerned with themselves; to find their difference significant is to "fetishize" it (30). Once feminists can distance an intersectionality that is hobbled by its connections to concerns of Black bodies and subjectivities (framed as provincial and parochial), the critic argues, transnational feminism can forge broader global solidarities among women. This argument belittles Black women for politics judged to be complicit with imperial fantasies of difference without attending to the long legacy of Black women's activism as transnational feminists working against murderous histories of imperial conquest and exploitation.[4] Such distancing denies actual solidarity to pursue a fictive utopian solidarity that ultimately requires the suppression of specificity.

Rectification

Rhetorics of rectification establish distanced and hierarchical relations between critics and targeted intersectional scholars. They present the critic as ferreting out deficiencies invisible to those being criticized. They deliver the critic's suggestions as directives, insinuating that injunctions are necessary because the targeted scholars are unaware of contemporary feminist debate, mired in the past, resistant to change, and unfit to manage their own work without the expert guidance of the critic. Critics using rhetorics of rectification establish their bona fides by urging the distancing of an incoherent, almost primitive "old intersectionality." They suggest that following their directives will lead to a "new intersectionality," a real theory or tool, more rigorous, more flexible, more scientific, more sophisticated, and better able to further our political desires. Rhetorics of rectification establish themselves on relations of hierarchy, with the critic in the superior position. The critic sets out a bill of particulars (itemizing errors and faults) and recommendations for specific improvements, and the critic demands that the responsible parties rectify these failings. Rectification uses the orders and demands emanating from the critic's superior position to trigger a cascade of deeply hierarchical rhetorical consequences. Rectification allows hegemonic logic to masquerade as radical critique.

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[4] See Carby (1987), Plummer (1996), Von Eschen (1997), Shakur (2001), Ransby (2003), Fujino (2005), Springer (2005), Boyce Davies (2007), and McDuffie (2011).

Rhetorics of rectification may seem plausible at the scene of argument because critics construct that scene so tightly. For example, one critic establishes her rhetorical authority by reciting a litany of faults that she claims characterize contemporary intersectionality (Nash 2008). But the rendition of intersectionality that she promises to "reinvigorate" rests on a corpus of texts that is small and old: eight texts by five women (from 1987 to 1992). She marshals against that intersectionality a corpus of critical arguments that is also small but generally more recent: six texts (from 1996 to 2005). Her citing of McCall (2005) demonstrates that the critic is aware that contemporary cross-disciplinary intersectional scholarship constitutes a collaborative and contested arena that has grown far beyond the legal scholars who first developed and deployed intersectionality. But her tight constraints on cited sources at the scene of argument allow her to treat intersectionality quite otherwise: as a narrow and unitary corporate enterprise identical to the texts of 1987–92. In consequence, she directs the texts of 1987–92 to begin to broaden the reach of intersectionality specifically in order to make possible research on a wide range of intersectional identities—research that the critic writing in 2008 knows already constitutes a veritable industry.

Rhetorics of rectification contrast with rhetorics of repair. Rhetorics of repair are intimate, not distant: they show concern for, work through, and work with that which they want to repair. In rhetorics of repair, critics of intersectionality position themselves as participating in thinking through problems and possibilities, accountable to all the scholars involved, and responsible for the outcomes (e.g., Rodríguez 2003; Reddy 2011). They enact horizontal solidarity, not hierarchical authority.

Regulation

Rhetorics of regulation propose increasing the precision of an unruly intersectionality by privileging positivist disciplinary research methods and standards that may be at odds with and undermine intersectionality's ability to provide radical critiques of power. Claims about proper methods are connected to power and always political (see Hawkesworth 2006, 28). It is possible to propose social science research methods for intersectionality without undermining its critical goals or fetishizing disciplinary categories and methods (McCall [2005] is an example). But, as Dhamoon argues, the focus on categories and error-free variables in positivist social science can evade intersectionality's attentiveness to "fluid and changeable forms and degrees of difference" (2011, 241 n. 1). Rhetorics of regulation may sacrifice tools of radical critique to dominant power without acknowledgment, proposing positivist methods imbued with dominant power relations as if they were "uncomplicated, value neutral, and uncontestable" (Hawkesworth 2006, 28). These rhetorics may fail to acknowledge disciplinary differences in goals, methods, and arguments, even inadvertently assuming that only "scientific knowledge" is valid, therefore treating "claims . . . not rooted in empirical observation as meaningless" (30). Rhetorics of regulation thus work to remove intersectionality from the sphere of antisubordination politics.

Rhetorics of regulation may seem plausible at the scene of argument because they are often framed as supporting both intersectionality and disciplinary goals, without acknowledging that the two may conflict because of intersectionality's origins in concern for power and subordination (e.g., Hancock 2007a, 2007b). As Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd (2010) argues, such moves of extraction devalue and misappropriate the conceptual terrain of Black feminism. One critic uses rhetorics of regulation toward such a goal, shaking intersectionality free from its origins as a critique of subordination so she can donate it to political science (Hancock 2007a). While claiming that the study of women of color is "a noble pursuit" (251), this critic reduces it to a "content-specialization" (252). She argues that intersectionality must become a "paradigm" in order to move beyond these "content" limits to a "broader level of analysis" (249); as a result, intersectionality will be able to address issues deeply significant to political science, thereby making intersectionality's "prospects . . . far brighter" (250). Purporting to provide "a coherent set of empirical research standards for intersectionality" (Hancock 2007b, 63), this critic systematically privileges—at great cost—the disciplinary positivism of political science over antisubordination arguments coming from other disciplinary paradigms. The version of political science the critic promotes conforms all too closely to the depoliticizing race- and gender-neutral positivist assumptions that intersectionality emerged to contest (Crenshaw 1988).

Reduction

Rhetorics of reduction work in a variety of ways. One of the most important is to reduce intersectional scholars of color to their embodied identities and denigrate their ability to theorize. Carol Brooks Gardner (1980, 332–33) argues that women and Blacks are "open persons" in public, whose embodied identities place them under specific forms of surveillance. Gardner's insight suggests that it is exactly the racial status of the originating intersectional scholars and their concern with racialized subordination that marks them as open persons for misrepresentation and flags intersectionality as particularly available for discursive policing. In an academy shaped by centuries of white privilege, attacking the intellectual creations of Black women can be a safe way to secure prestige. Attacking white supremacy, however, entails confronting much more powerful enemies. Critics using rhetorics of reduction reinforce racial hierarchies rather than challenge them, deploying against intersectional scholars the very racial politics that intersectionality has revealed to be saturated with structural power. They denigrate intersectionality by conflating it with simplified representations of other kinds of racial politics, holding it accountable for arguments (particularly about narrow gender essentialism and race-based nationalisms) that it helped complicate and transform. In the case of intersectionality, our practices of critique spotlight the target being criticized, leaving the critic in shadow. Occasionally, however, the assumptions of critics come to light. For example, Gail Lewis (2009) relates that critics at a European conference on intersectionality tended to treat race as a real biological difference rather than an ideological category, with apparent consequence for their positioning of the claims of racialized scholars. According to Lewis, debates about whether intersectionality was a theory or only a heuristic device sometimes seemed to presuppose that "anything that emerged from within the structural experience of marginalized women (in this case African American and other US women of colour) was always already incapable of being understood as theory, always only a category describing experience" (207).

Rhetorics of reduction authorize critics to charge that intersectionality holds various social relations, categories, and identities—particularly racial identities—as static, fixed, rigid, clearly demarcated, determined, and predetermined (Staunæs 2003; Prins 2006; Ferree 2009).[5] Such claims would be valuable in modifying intersectionality if true, but they are asserted and not demonstrated, claimed but not explained, left ungrounded and underdeveloped, and not supported by the textual evidence presented. Sometimes the claims are bolstered by the authority of a chain of citations leading to texts asserting similar opinions with no evidence or simply repeating "what is 'known' to be true." One critic fixes what she describes as a unified "systemic" American intersectionality (Prins 2006, 279–80). This argument discredits racialized American intersectional scholars through caricature—providing a copy for which there is no original. The critic argues that this American intersectionality assumes a "static" view of power and race (280). It conflates race with racism (280). It assumes that racism, classism, and sexism are "static and rigid systems of domination" (281). It sees "racism as a single system in which Whites dominate Blacks" (280). It ignores any other groups subjected to racism (280). It sees gender, race, and class as "systems of domination, oppression, and marginalization that determine and structure identities" (279). It finds identities significant exclusively as effects of social subordination and discursive disempowerment (279). It assumes that the meanings of identities are "determined by racism, classism, sexism" (280). It assumes that subjects are "primarily constituted by systems of domination and marginalization" (280). It assumes that subjects are "passive bearers of the meanings of social categories" (280). It assumes that identity constructions are made and contingent—but "made by the powers-that-be and as such false" (281). It assumes that subjects have some degree of agency (280) but tends to ignore it (281). It predominantly aims to reveal the unilateral power of social representations (yet sometimes argues that power is not unilateral; 280). It is enmeshed in theories of ideology (281). The critic bases these reductive claims on a mischaracterization of a few decades-old texts (a technique that also appears in Staunæs [2003] and Nash [2008]). The result of such reductive arguments is to create an immobilized originating intersectionality shackled by its attention to structural power.

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[5] Dorthe Staunæs (2003) argues that she will redefine intersectionality so that "concrete intersections, hierarchies and elaboration are not predetermined" (101). She frames prior intersectionality as "understand[ing] subjects as determined by social systems, [having] a tendency toward fixing categories and identities [based on] underlying assumptions of determination, clear demarcations and fixed substance" (103). Myra Marx Ferree (2009) argues that she shares "the critical view of intersectionality as a static list of structural locations" so she will "adopt a more dynamic and institutional understanding of intersectionality" (87). I examine how Baukje Prins (2006) employs these terms below.

Tropes

The four rhetorical frames proceed through specific tropes, two of which I discuss below.

It Reinscribes What It Claims to Redress

The trope *It Reinscribes What It Claims to Redress* operates by appearing to turn the original argument against those who have produced it. The trope works to suggest that intersectionality itself is flawed because it cannot rise above the conditions it analyzes. *It Reinscribes* may sometimes serve as a legitimate critical fulcrum, so it is important to clarify the specifics of its use in a particular critique: What is the basic claim? How is it being defined? What assumptions underlie its deployment? What evidence is marshaled to support it? How is that evidence interpreted? What inferences are being made? What consequences are we expected to draw from the claim?

"It Reinscribes" appears in one argument to claim that "intersectional projects often *replicate precisely the approaches that they critique*" (Nash 2008, 6; emphasis added). This critic justifies the claim "It Reinscribes" by asserting that Crenshaw's argument in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) focuses too narrowly on deconstructing categories of race and gender. The critic treats as important evidence the fact that Crenshaw did develop arguments about the categories of race and gender but did not develop arguments about other categories. The critic argues:

> While Crenshaw endeavors to use black women's incapacity to comply with race/gender categories to demonstrate the inadequacy of the categories themselves, her argument shores up the conception that black women's identities are constituted *exclusively* by race and gender. That is, Crenshaw focuses on black women because they are "multiply burdened," yet her analysis *precludes* an examination of forms of "multiple burdens" (or the intersections of privileges and burdens) beyond race and gender. With little attention to the role that sexuality, nationality, or class, for example, might play . . . black women function *exclusively* as sites to demonstrate the importance of race-and-gender. . . . Crenshaw offers little attention to the ways in which race and gender function . . . at varying historical moments. That is, black women's race and gender are treated as trans-historical constants. (Nash 2008, 7; emphasis added)

The critic significantly reframes Crenshaw's argument at the beginning of this passage. Crenshaw endeavors to demonstrate the incapacity of legal doctrine and its single-axis analysis to account for the position of Black women. Yet the critic presents Crenshaw's argument as if it were a critique of the agency of Black women. Here *It Reinscribes* works at the scene of argument by, first, dropping from sight Crenshaw's arguments about intersectionality and multiple categories of analysis; second, reframing Crenshaw's arguments as solely about race and gender; and finally, claiming that to deconstruct two important categories is to reinforce the notion that there are only two exclusive categories for analyses of identity. While a scholar might mount such an argument, Crenshaw does not. In fact, the critic is impelled to revisit Crenshaw's argument exactly because it was not read as reinscribing the two categories and because it was read as providing a tool to analyze the ways that multiple categories might influence one another and social identities. "Demarginalizing the Intersection" addresses a specific conceptual problem: "the problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw 1989, 139), commonly represented in the conventional usage "Blacks and women" (139 n. 3). Crenshaw argues that conceptualizing gender and race as single-axis categories characterized antidiscrimination law, grounding her analysis in what she argues to be intersections of race and gender in three specific Title VII cases that do not include other categories of analysis. "Demarginalizing" demonstrates that the courts treated race and gender as mutually exclusive and further argues that antiracist and feminist discourses are not innocent of similar assumptions.

The critic, however, presents Crenshaw's arguments anachronistically, in ways that reflect what people have since done with the tool of intersectionality rather than reflecting Crenshaw's original arguments. Crenshaw is more modest in her claims than the critic suggests. Crenshaw argues that she will take Black women as "the starting point" (1989, 140), that she will investigate the stories of Black women plaintiffs as "one way" (141) to approach the problem of intersectionality, and that she will use the court's single-axis analysis to demonstrate that it "erases" Black women and their multidimensional experiences (140, 141, 147). Crenshaw does *not* claim to offer a general theory of intersectionality, a theory of identity, or a theory to account for the total experience or identities of Black women. She draws from Black feminist thought the concept of multidimensional experiences; labels the concept "intersectionality"; uses the concept to criticize the limits of legal, feminist, and antiracist discourse; and offers possible alternatives in a generative way that has proven useful to many other scholars. The productive effects of Crenshaw's arguments are not fully accounted for within her text; she provided a set of tools at a specific historical moment when scholars were in need of accessible, flexible tools for feminist antiracist analysis.

The deployment of *It Reinscribes* in this instance charges that Crenshaw should not have argued the way she did in 1989, given what the critic knows in 2008. Problems that many people found complex in 1989—problems that were reframed totally by Crenshaw's intervention—appear simple to the contemporary critic. In effect, this criticism reveals what it denies. The simplicity of the problem and the critic's use of it to chastise Crenshaw demonstrates how greatly the tool of intersectionality has changed the terms of debate in the ensuing years. Since 1989, many scholars have used the tool of intersectionality to develop theories, arguments, and models about categories and identities. Crenshaw did not claim in 1989 that she was even starting to analyze the multiple burdens of Black women's identities. Yet the critic argues that Crenshaw should have created a model of Black women's identities; that such a model should have been attentive to the ways that identity is influenced by categories other than race and gender (sexuality, nationality, class); and that, in fact, Crenshaw should have developed a model that accounted for historical change, attentive to varying historical moments. This use of *It Reinscribes* also positions Crenshaw's 1989 arguments as enormously powerful constraints on the future of intersectionality: by examining two categories, the critic claims, Crenshaw's "analysis *precludes* an examination of forms of 'multiple burdens' (or the intersections of privileges and burdens) beyond race and gender" (Nash 2008, 7; emphasis added). This claim is clearly counterfactual: rather than precluding such considerations, Crenshaw's analysis helped produce them.

This deployment of *It Reinscribes* works by treating both Crenshaw's text and the critic's arguments against it as if they shared the same historical time. The critic cannot sustain a claim that Crenshaw's lack of attention to the categories she wishes to promote (sexuality, nationality, class) prevented productive scholarship; she is instead circling back—with all the knowledge created since Crenshaw's 1989 article—to hold Crenshaw at fault for not having produced that knowledge in 1989. Put in schematic form, this rhetorical strategy is as follows: the critic revisits a particularly generative argument from the past, abstracts it from its context, treats it as if it were contemporary, holds it accountable to arguments that emerged subsequently, and finds it at fault for failing to produce subsequent knowledge in its originating moment. Unfortunately, this use of *It Reinscribes* is not idiosyncratic but is a widespread critical practice found throughout academic discourse.

A second use of *It Reinscribes What It Claims to Redress* argues that the language of intersectionality fails on its own terms, that it repeats the dominant discourses it intends to oppose. One critic uses *It Reinscribes* to argue that intersectionality reinscribes dominant discourses almost everywhere (Carastathis 2008): she argues that Elizabeth V. Spelman (1988), Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 2003), and Diana Tietjens Meyers (2000) all reproduce or reinscribe.[6] The critic treats any description of dominant ways of conceiving identity categories as ipso facto the position that intersectionality inhabits, conflating the position of intersectionality with the state of affairs it critiques. *It Reinscribes* here assumes that it is possible to make antisubordination arguments without referring to and using dominant discourses. Yet working with and repeating hegemonic discourses is an inescapable feature constitutive of all oppositional arguments in a political world, not a problem singularly attached to the concept of intersectionality. If we live in a sexist, racist, hierarchical, and unjust world, then any citing of that world, any objection to those conditions, and any feminist or antiracist claims—including those of the critic—necessarily interact with, participate in, and in that sense reinscribe the conditions they oppose. Such use of *It Reinscribes* may seem plausible at the scene of argument if a critic does not clearly distinguish between, first, the assumptions of dominant discourses and, second, critique of the assumptions of dominant discourses. Failing to make this distinction is symptomatic of a problematic critical move not limited to discussions of intersectionality. For example, Carole Pateman argues that some critics of her groundbreaking book *The Sexual Contract* took as her position what was actually her explanation of the arguments and assumptions of contract theorists (2007, 228). Recognizing this distinction acknowledges that intersectional scholars use dominant language rhetorically and tactically. At the scene of argument, intersectional scholars are engaged in persuasion: they need to explain dominant conceptions and their inadequacies in order to present intersectionality as an alternative.

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[6] Intersectionality "illicitly imports the very model it purports to overcome" (Carastathis 2008, 23); it "inadvertently reproduces the very assumptions it claims to be redressing" (24); it "conjures the very ontology that its exponents set out to undermine" (27–28); it reinscribes the masculine as the generic Black person and the white as the generic woman (28); structural intersectionality reinscribes political intersectionality on the level of identity (28); political

It Is Insufficiently Deferential to Privileged White Men

The trope *It is Insufficiently Deferential to Privileged White Men* operates by holding a unified corporate rendition of intersectionality accountable for inadequate management of its relations with privileged white males. As is true of many conventional tropes deployed to criticize intersectionality, *Insufficiently Deferential* treats one of a range of debated positions as a generally accepted and self-evident criterion for judgment. It also folds together research conducted by hundreds of scholars to put it under the aegis of this corporate intersectionality. In the two cases of *Insufficiently Deferential* examined here, critics find this corporate intersectionality intellectually and ethically flawed because privileged white men are not studied with sufficient vigor and productivity.

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intersectionality reproduces “a falsely universalizing unitary model of ‘women’ ” (29); intersectionality reifies structural relations of power (29); Crenshaw reproduces the “very logic she is criticizing” (34 n. 26); Collins reinscribes by explaining current assumptions (28, 35 n. 38); Spelman reinscribes compartmentalization when she argues it cannot be done (35 n. 40).

One critic deploys *Insufficiently Deferential* to charge that intersectional scholars claim that all identities are intersectional yet deny that white male identities are intersectional (Nash 2008). The entire evidence for this assertion of denial consists of ungrounded speculative musings by Peter Kwan (1996). Kwan acknowledges that intersectionality was developed as a tool for social justice to address how both antiracist and feminist discourses marginalized racialized women, but he comments at one point: "straight white maleness arguably is a multiple identity, but intersectionality theorists would resist the claim by straight white males that theirs is an intersectional subjectivity" (1275). Kwan's comment has the evidentiary value of gossip since he provides no evidence for his claim; its credibility is further undermined by the fact that both Kwan and the critic cite a previously published article that specifically discusses white male identities as intersectional (Crenshaw 1989, 142 n. 12). Given that intersectionality operates as an analytic framework to examine how structural power creates identity and modulates privilege, why would an intersectional theorist "resist the claim by straight white males that theirs is an intersectional subjectivity"? An intersectional theorist might, however, resist the implications of this critic's use of Kwan: that all intersectional identities should be treated as equally productive sites to develop arguments about antisubordination and that intersectional scholars are at fault for attending to antisubordination rather than developing an equal opportunity research paradigm.

Like the judges in the Bakke case, this critic wishes to promote "diversity" over antisubordination.[7] The critic condemns her anachronistically constructed corporate intersectionality for its apparent favoritism: much research about subordinated groups and little about white men (Nash 2008). Intersectionality, she argues, has failed to allocate its research efforts evenly enough. Ignoring the overwhelming apparatus of knowledge production focused on the desires, needs, interests, and thoughts of privileged white males, she chastises a small cadre of intersectional scholars for not, once again, serving privileged white men. She positions such scholars as enmeshed in inconsistency: they claim that intersectionality necessarily "refers to all subject positions" (9), yet their research tends to focus on "multiply marginalized subjects" (9–10) rather than spreading itself evenly across identities. The critic treats the difference between the two claims as a failure, a contradiction, and a virtual crisis, as if it is incumbent upon scholars to deploy all research tools evenly across all possible analytic categories and as if this anachronistic intersectionality has failed to meet a promise to do so. She deploys *Insufficiently Deferential* to instruct intersectionality that if it "*purports* to provide a general tool" it must "*begin* to broaden its reach" and "theorize an array of subject experience(s)" (10; emphasis added). While it is disingenuous to treat the distribution of research on white males as evidence of either ethical or intellectual failings on the part of intersectionality, more disturbing is the critic's assumption that she is authorized to criticize intersectional scholars for not having already given up their goals of antisubordination in favor of creating broad, general tools for all populations and identities.

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[7] In *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978), the Supreme Court limited the use of race in university admissions solely to measures that enhanced the diverse experiences of white students rather than including measures to counter the effects of societal discrimination.

A second critic uses *Insufficiently Deferential* to charge that intersectional scholars claim that all identities are intersectional, yet intersectionality "contributes *nothing novel* to our conception of the 'white man'" (Carastathis 2008, 28; emphasis added). While Kwan criticizes intersectionality theorists for allegedly "resisting" white males' claim to an intersectional subjectivity, this critic criticizes intersectionality theorists because the white male appears to have no interest at all in claiming an intersectional subjectivity. She argues that less privileged intersectional subjects (labeled "hyper-oppressed") "viscerally experience" their identities as intersectional (28), but white males do not. Because white males take their doubly privileged status for granted (part of the "wages of privilege"; 28), she argues, their identities cannot be considered intersectional: "*only* hyper-oppressed subjects [have intersectional identities] in any *existentially* and *politically meaningful* sense" (28; emphasis added). In consequence, she concludes, intersectionality's claim that all identities are intersectional is false. In making this argument, the critic first inaccurately assumes that intersectionality is legitimized only if all subjects are consciously aware of their intersectionality or respond to it emotionally. Second, she errs in taking at face value what she claims to be the indifference of the white male to his intersectionality. We have an enormous body of evidence demonstrating white males' devotion to both their maleness and their "whiteness as property" (Harris 1993), as well as their visceral emotional response to any attempt to challenge the privileges incurred through this intersectional identity. To ignore this evidence in favor of their projections of unified selfhood is to be excessively deferential to privileged white men.

A tool such as intersectionality sets a framework that may be used to analyze how power operates to construct specific identities without at the same time guaranteeing that all examinations will prove analytically or politically productive. Without acknowledging structures of inequality and stratification, critics using *Insufficiently Deferential to Privileged White Men* deploy a liberal pluralist position that assumes that all identities deserve their day in the sun. If critics think intersectionality is a matter of identity rather than power, they cannot see which differences make a difference. Yet it is exactly our analyses of power that reveal which differences carry significance.

Conclusion

Structures of dominance are the conditions of possibility for antisubordination arguments. Feminists cannot escape all the traps set by the racialized and gendered history of the disciplines, but we can destabilize them, explore their contradictions, and work through them to open up new possibilities. Yet *intending* our arguments to be resistant or oppositional cannot make them so. Discursive effects cannot be known in advance or assumed to reflect the intentions of those who argue; we cannot know fully or control the consequences of our own roles in the circulation of discourses. Rather, as Michel Foucault argues, "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1980, 101). The specific arguments we make, their rhetorical form and evidence, and the consequences we draw from them all can be points of resistance or stumbling blocks that trap us into deploying dominant discourses when we think we are resisting them. Yet these discourses are what we have—the sites, the circumstances, and the means—to understand ourselves and change our conditions.

Because we lack a fully theorized understanding of the scene of argument as a shared social space, we often consign rhetorical choices to matters of private choice and personal style. Yet while much of the labor that goes into writing is conducted in solitude, writing is a quintessentially social act. All writers enter a dialogue already in progress. "The word in language," Bakhtin observes, "is half someone else's" (1981, 293). The scene of argument is populated by many different writers, readers, reviewers, editors, and teachers. It is shaped by practices and processes inside institutions that all of us help to construct, in graduate programs, journal and manuscript review processes, panels at professional meetings, and informal prestige networks. Rhetoric matters not just because we want to present the ideas we already have eloquently and effectively but also because the scene of argument is a site where new ideas are produced and old ideas modified and rendered obsolete. My purpose here is not to scold or praise individual authors but instead to advance an understanding of the scene of argument as a shared social resource, as an entity for which we are all responsible, yet also as a terrain laden with traps. As Toni Cade Bambara explained three decades ago, principled political writing entails fusing together the diverse strands of knowledge that disciplinary frames tear apart. Such writing requires us to resist the predisposition that the disciplines promote "to accept fragmented truths and distortions as the whole" (1980, 154). Dominant modes of thinking and habits of academic life can authorize promoting and echoing partial truths with confidence, even certainty, as if they were the whole. Our job, as Bambara explains it, is "to tell the truth and not get trapped" (1983, 14). I demonstrate here that some critiques of intersectionality fall into patterned rhetorical frameworks and tropes that serve as traps to interfere with the ability to tell the truth.

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