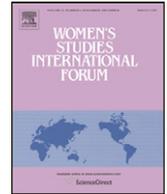


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## Shifting analytics and linking theories: A conversation about the “meaning-making” of intersectionality and transnational feminism

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### SYNOPSIS

Transnational feminism and intersectionality have been widely celebrated in women's studies and feminist scholarship as a theory, framework, and politics. As antiracist feminist scholars who research and teach in these areas, this conversational essay grapples with the shifting meanings of these analytics within our research and how we have experienced their institutionalization in women's studies and related fields. This essay explores the “desires” – to borrow Robyn Wiegman's language – that underpin feminist engagement with transnationalism and intersectionality and considers the potential spaces of intellectual co-existence between intersectionality and transnational feminism, especially given how they have traveled and circulated across the humanities and social sciences.

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### Introduction

Our conversation about intersectionality and transnationalism is situated in a moment we might call the unfolding present. It is a moment marked by the institutionalization of women's studies in the U.S. academy (Kennedy Lapovsky & Beins, 2005), the interdisciplinary circulation of the field's leading analytics (intersectionality and transnational feminism), and the fetishization of the rhetoric of diversity (Ahmed, 2012). As antiracist feminist scholars of color who share a curiosity about how intersectionality and transnational feminism animate our scholarship and politics, and shape the disciplines that we call home, this conversation is, then, always already about the field of women's studies, its critical practices, investments, divestments, and narrative strategies.

These are important moments in the history of women's studies in the U.S. academy, moments where the field is increasingly theorizing itself, its dominant narratives, and its

intellectual and political attachments (see Hemmings, 2011; Wiegman, 2012). The university itself has increasingly become a subject of analysis, with new attention to the formation of disciplines and interdisciplines, and with renewed interest in studying the relationship between the university and the state (See Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Ferguson, 2012; Newfield, 2003, 2011). Though our essay focuses on intersectionality and transnational feminism, and the variety of ways that women's studies constructs and circulates these analytics, it is impossible to engage in that conversation without also considering this moment in the U.S. “corporate university's” history, one where intersectionality and transnationalism continue to be conflated with diversity and difference (Luft & Ward, 2009). In this moment, faculty of color often have to vociferously defend the intellectual value of scholarship on gender, nation, and race; at the same time, we are celebrated for the diversity “value” we confer upon our universities, and our attachments to intersectionality and transnationalism are lauded for their attention to so-called differences (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González & Harris, 2012; Mohanty, 2006).

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Our exchange contributes to the robust and exciting interdisciplinary body of work considering the place of intersectionality and transnationalism in feminist theory and institutionalized women's studies. This body of scholarship has proliferated in the wake of the twentieth anniversary of Kimberlé Crenshaw's canonical articles that coined the term intersectionality, yielding special issues of two scholarly journals (*Signs* in 2013 and *Du Bois Review* in 2014) alongside a host of edited volumes devoted to intersectionality, its relationship to transnationalism, and its place in women's studies. These special issues and volumes celebrated the "burgeoning field of intersectional studies," carefully traced the "remarkable degree of theoretical and methodological engagement that the concept of intersectionality has invited among feminist and antiracist scholars around the globe," and asked how intersectionality and transnationalism have "traveled" — across disciplinary borders, across national borders, and apart from the bodies of women of color (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013: 785, 787; see also Crooms, 2003). Further, widely-cited and taught introductory textbooks to women's studies courses have institutionalized these analytics for the foreseeable future (Baca Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 2010; Grewal & Kaplan, 2005).

At the same time, there is a growing body of feminist scholarship critically examining the institutionalization of these analytics (Nash, 2014; Wiegman, 2012). Chandra Mohanty, for example, writes, "Radical theory can in fact become a commodity to be consumed; no longer seen as a product of activist scholarship or connected to emancipatory knowledge, it can circulate as a sign of prestige in an elitist, neoliberal landscape" (Mohanty, 2013: 971). Mohanty's concern about the de-radicalization of analytics like intersectionality and transnationalism is echoed by other scholars, including Nikol Alexander-Floyd, who criticizes "a new wave of raced-gendered occultic commodification" where "the voices, intellectual contributions, and political projects of black feminists magically disappear or are supplanted by post-black feminist readings of intersectionality" (Alexander-Floyd, 2012: 19).

Our contribution to this scholarly moment takes the form of a *conversation*, a form that is important to us for numerous intellectual and political reasons. We have been inspired by the collaborations of other scholars, including Chandra Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, the Combahee River Collective, and the Kitchen Table Press. These meaningful models encouraged us to produce a form that breaks with the conventional journal article, and that instead makes readily visible two scholars actively working through a set of intellectual and political questions. More importantly, we decided on this form to honor the histories of intersectionality and transnationalism, analytics that were developed and crafted through political and intellectual collaborations.

Ultimately, our article enacts a scholarly conversation, and *not* a debate that foregrounds opposing scholarly approaches. It is, instead, a testament to two antiracist feminist scholars of color writing and thinking together, and making that collaborative process transparent to readers who also aspire to consider this moment in the history of transnational feminism and intersectionality. We are deeply aware that we are writing in a context where so much scholarly exchange is set up — and is even believed to *thrive* — around disagreement

and contentious dissent. Our approach here, one rooted in intellectual friendship, is meant to be a rupture with the kinds of competition that the "corporate university" increasingly demands from scholars. In other words, we embrace collaboration as a rigorous methodology of *collective knowledge production* and as a radical political act seeking to resist the structure of a "corporate university" that continues to privilege individual intellectual labor.

Our conversation began in 2013 when we were both postdoctoral fellows. Over the course of the year, we discussed our disciplines, our research, the analytics we were deploying, and our experiences of institutional life more generally. Indeed, we started to write *for* each other in part, because we were drawn to each other's research and wanted to continue the discussion we started as fellows: we engaged in free writes, asked each other questions related to our work, and responded to what the other had written. The purpose of these exchanges was to think together and to remain in conversation; the purpose was also to let the conversation unfold, to let it be structured by our curiosities and our interests, inspired by what we were reading, teaching, and exploring in our research. Ultimately, we decided to write an essay that recorded the questions that we circled back to again and again, and the provisional answers we were crafting. As a result, we view ourselves as interlocutors, and we view this working document as one that invites readers to grapple with questions about intersectionality and transnationalism along with us. As we formalized our thoughts in this form, we focus on a set of questions that we believe animate the field today and that continue to shape and inform our respective scholarship and teaching as tenure-track faculty.

*Q: What are your attachments to "intersectionality" and "transnationalism" as theories, methods, politics, frameworks, and analytics? What do you find useful or productive about these terms?*

*Falcón:* I have been drawn and remain attached to intersectionality because it was the first theoretical, political, and epistemological concept developed by women of color to have profound resonance in the academy (Anzaldúa, 1987; Beale, 1970; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Davis, 1983; King, 1988; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). You can see the impact of this concept across the social sciences and humanities and it has circulated in certain ways outside of the U.S. as well. Intersectionality gave us a language and framework out of the quandary: "All the women are white and all the blacks are men" (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1993). I remain attached to intersectionality because it is a logic that removes us from thinking in silos and asks for us to delve deeper into complex inter-relationships.

Intersectionality has captured the feminist imagination and as such, how to define it, apply it, and use as a methodology have all fostered vibrant scholarly work and debate. I find myself drawn to thinking about the typology of intersectionality because it recognizes that its use varies, and richly so. Sociologists Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree offer a productive typology of intersectionality that recognizes this variance. They describe intersectionality as group-centered,

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