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Intersectionality and Epistemic Erasure: A Caution to Decolonial Feminism

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Abstract

In this article I caution that María Lugones's critiques of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional theory posit a dangerous form of epistemic erasure, which underlies Lugones's decolonial methodology. This essay serves as a critical engagement with Lugones's essay "Radical Multiculturalism and Women of Color Feminisms" in order to uncover the decolonial lens within Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. In her assertion that intersectionality is a "white bourgeois feminism colluding with the oppression of Women of Color," Lugones precludes any possibility of intersectionality operating as a decolonial method. Although Lugones states that her "decolonial feminism" is for all women of color, it ultimately excludes Black women, particularly with her misconstruing of Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality that is rooted within the Black American feminist tradition. I explore Lugones's claims by juxtaposing her rendering of intersectionality with Crenshaw's and conclude that Lugones's decolonial theory risks erasing Black women from her framework.

Introduction

In 1989, critical race scholar and feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw published "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." It was in this historic essay that she coined the term *intersectionality* to describe the lives of those whose experiences are at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw 1989). This term was then expanded to examine the ways other marginalized identities composed the multidimensional lives of individuals. As a crucial addition to Black feminist theory, Crenshaw's work has been cited in thousands of articles and books as scholars continue to theorize about those who live multidimensional lives.

Likewise, María Lugones's decolonial transition in the mid-2000s marked a crucial pivot in her conception of women of color feminisms. This period of her work formally marked race and gender as colonial constructs. Lugones notes, "The theories of feminism developed by the coalition Women of Color in the United States in the 1980s transformed the meaning of gender" (Lugones 2011, 68). One such article was Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence

against Women of Color” (Crenshaw 1991). In fact, it is this very article that Lugones responds to in “Radical Multiculturalism and Women of Color Feminisms.” In this piece, Lugones offers a critique of Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality under the claim that when “unmasked,” it is seen as “colluding with the oppression of Women of Color and as serving Western hegemony” (Lugones 2014, 72).

In this article, I argue that Lugones’s critiques of intersectionality, which envelop her decolonial feminist methodology, risk a form of epistemic erasure that truncates and distorts Black feminism’s contributions to decolonial theory. First, I provide Lugones’s critiques of Crenshaw and discuss how these critiques (among others) fall into a fundamental misunderstanding of Crenshaw’s theory. Next, I explore Lugones’s concept of “fusion” and evaluate her claim that it will supersede intersectionality. To do this I compare Lugones’s articulation of fusion in “Radical Multiculturalism” with Crenshaw’s early articulations of intersectionality in “Demarginalizing the Intersection” and “Mapping the Margins.” From this I conclude that Lugones and those who embrace these critiques of intersectionality risk incorporating a form of epistemic erasure in their decolonial theory. Finally, I discuss the lurking issue within Lugones’s particular criticism, which is the appropriation, extraction, and decontextualization of Black feminist thought. This produces a methodology that, despite Lugones’s claims, cannot be practiced by all women of color. Ultimately, I conclude that the most harmful aspect of Lugones’s criticism is that it labels a crucial tenet of Black feminist epistemology as a contributor to white hegemony, thus precluding any possibility of intersectionality operating as a decolonial methodology.

I. Lugones’s Critique of Crenshaw and Epistemic Backlash

Lugones opens “Radical Multiculturalism” by noting that the current movement of women of color feminisms is a “shift from a logic of oppression to a logic of resistance” (Lugones 2014, 68). By this I take her to mean that women of color feminisms engage in resistance against oppressive epistemic frameworks that seek to enforce a single-axis framework upon subjects. She warns readers against certain logics and frameworks that mask themselves as feminist and multicultural but that actually operate as oppressive logics. She then moves toward “two unmaskings of white bourgeois feminisms as colluding with the oppression of Women of Color and as serving Western hegemony” (72), with the first unmasking concerning intersectionality. She focuses primarily on its theorization through Crenshaw, who, she asserts, theorizes within the logics of oppression. Lugones claims, “The notion that oppressions intersect, or interconnect, is present in the work of many U.S. Women of Color feminists. To understand that oppressions intersect is to understand that there is a relation between the social situations of white women and the situations of Women of Color” (73). I will note here that by conflating the usage of “intersect” and “interconnect,” Lugones is already committing a grave error in her interpretation of Crenshaw’s theorizing. What Lugones previously described is the notion of “interconnection,” which is when identities coincide fluidly and contribute to the full legibility of a person. The intersection that Crenshaw theorizes is not a place of liveliness or multiplicity, but a site of erasure, which I will return to in the second section of this essay.

Lugones continues her essay by noting that although intersectionality enables us to see the relations of power regarding gender, race, and class between white and nonwhite women, it still renders nonwhite women as legible only under a logic of oppression (74). It appears Lugones is asserting that since Crenshaw has not explicitly noted that the

category of *woman* excludes women of color, her theory fails to make nonwhite women visible without using a category that excludes them. Therefore, when Crenshaw notes in “Mapping the Margins” that she is “theorizing about violence against women of color,” according to Lugones, Crenshaw is theorizing about only white women (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). This is because Lugones argues that *women of color* is an empty category, meaning the term evokes no epistemic register. The category is empty since colonial logics allow the term *woman* to reference only the lives, being, and experiences of white women.¹

In the following excerpt, Lugones provides the most crucial and most controversial aspect of her critique of Crenshaw and intersectionality:

Crenshaw understands race and gender as categories of oppression in the very logical terms assumed in the hegemonic mainstream: as logically separate from each other. She emphasizes the distinction between intersectionality and antiessentialism. The categories are real even if one can criticize them as essentialist. Racism and sexism exist. Crenshaw asserts that the categories are meaningful and have consequences. (Lugones 2014, 74)

Here Lugones is asserting that not only does intersectionality uphold oppressive logics, but that Crenshaw posits *validity* to such logics. Lugones’s proof for this is that Crenshaw states in “Mapping the Margins” that she holds intersectionality to be distinct from anti-essentialism. This distinction leads Lugones to believe that Crenshaw is stating that race and gender are, in fact, mutually exclusive categories, and so her use of “women of color” is only an empty reference with no real subjects to fill it. Moreover, if Crenshaw believes the categories of “gender” and “race” to be real, then Lugones claims that Crenshaw has authenticated colonial logics that are used to subjugate nondominant, nonwhite subjects. She concludes her critique of Crenshaw by stating, “Oppression cannot be erased conceptually” (75). In other words, Crenshaw’s theorizing is only that: pure theory. If we actually want to confront oppressive logics, then we need something that will do more in action than it will in an article. Lugones states this is evident in the constant need to presuppose oppressive categorial logics when thinking about intersectionality, which she claims is because intersectional theory operates only in a realm of oppression. In order to state where subjects can resist, we must move away from categorial thinking and toward what Lugones calls “fusion” (75). This final step requires that we move beyond intersectionality and toward a methodology that is resistant and decolonial.

Before I move to the second section of my essay, I will briefly respond to a few of Lugones’s criticisms. First, note that intersectionality does not *uphold* categorial logics, but *highlights* oppressive epistemic structures created by dominant hegemonic groups. It is important to note that even with the quotes from Crenshaw that Lugones highlights in “Radical Multiculturalism,” none of these accurately represents Crenshaw’s theorizing. Crenshaw’s focus on theorizing intersectionality highlights epistemic erasure and critiques epistemic frameworks. She states that these frameworks are established and maintained by dominant hegemonic groups and institutions, which are what hold categorial logics in place (not intersectionality). Vivian May comments, “intersectionality offers a means to question and challenge dominant logics, to further anti-subordination efforts, and to forge collective models for social transformation that do not replicate or reinforce inequalities, erasures and distortions . . .” (May 2015, 4). Although it may appear on the surface that intersectional theory argues for a separation

of identities like race and gender, it must be understood that intersectional theory (properly performed) refers to the single-axis logics already in place. Intersectionality, as May notes, is an analytical tool to be used to challenge the misgivings epistemic subjects feel because of a lack of multidimensional frameworks.

Lugones argues that we must “move beyond intersectionality,” but she still uses facets of intersectionality to critique it. It may come as a surprise to some, but the critique of categorial logics against intersectionality is not new. In fact, May notes in her essay “‘Speaking into the Void’? Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash” that the ways in which theorists critique intersectionality often rely on “the very frameworks that intersectionality theorists have identified as highly problematic tools of misrepresentation” (May 2014, 94). In this piece May notes that the power of interpretive practices is directly related to the epistemic backlash that intersectionality consistently receives. Neither May nor I are arguing that intersectionality is beyond critique, but what we do agree on is that these critiques do tend to reinforce the same logics that intersectionality is seeking to address (95). Rather than seeking to negate any form of critique against Crenshaw, I am advising that care be taken in the construction of these critiques. May further states:

Intersectionality challenges the pull of prevailing mindsets, in part by drawing from political expectations, lived experiences, and analytic positions not crafted solely within the bounds of dominant imaginaries. Unfortunately, critique narratives sometimes flatten such resistance, rendering it invisible or meaningless by adhering to conventions, even hegemonic epistemological assumptions in terms of the questions asked, assessments offered, and expectations brought to bear. . . . Even as intersectionality seeks, in part, to uncover epistemic disenfranchisement. . . it also confronts these dynamics. (96)

May’s article assists in highlighting that, although intersectionality is rooted in demonstrating that subjects live multidimensional lives, intersectionality is still misconstrued as a tool of hegemonic groups. This, May argues, is a form of epistemic violence that occurs from lack of appropriate attention to the theoretical grounding Crenshaw and other Black feminists use when they theorize about intersectionality (97). This violence, or “epistemic backlash” as May terms it, is how interpretive powers act as gatekeepers for how Black feminism is utilized and expressed. The reason to be wary of these interpretations is the normative consequences they hold (99). I caution that although it is unlikely that Lugones saw herself as participating in such violence, it must be noted that liberatory theorization is not beyond misconstruing intersectional theory.

Lugones’s claim about categorial logics is inaccurate for two reasons. First, identities are not created in the intersection, so there is no upholding of categorial logics in this sense. The intersection, which is different from the “interconnection” that Lugones references, is where marginalized identities converge in such a way that dominant frameworks cannot hold them. It is not where social personas are recognized as fluid or multidimensional, but is a site of social erasure. It is a misrepresentation of the work of intersectional theorists to say that intersectionality upholds categorial logics. When Crenshaw and others say that identities such as race and gender intersect, they are not imposing those identities on subjects, *nor* are they claiming that identities of subjects are obtained within these categories. Rather they are providing a *descriptive* (as opposed to normative) claim focused on addressing epistemic structures that allow for the erasure of subjects. Categorial logics are oppressive logics with fallacious

backgrounding, but they are nevertheless a societal reality. Thus, the point of intersectionality is to reveal and magnify the particular types of silences and omissions that result from the categories.

Second, Crenshaw consistently notes in “Mapping the Margins” that intersectionality—by itself—is not enough to act as a liberating method. Crenshaw’s mid-2010 theorizing and reflections on intersectionality refer to it commonly as a “heuristic method,” meaning that the work of intersectionality is never complete.² Additionally, she issues a “call for multiplicity” (Crenshaw 1991, 1244–45; May 2015, 99) consistently throughout her essay, but she notes that her emphasis on intersectionality is, as I have noted, to find the erasures, to map the socially invisible. Whereas Lugones argues for the attainment and maintenance of a multiplicitous self, Crenshaw instead points to the epistemic structures that prohibit a multiplicitous self from being recognized. Crenshaw is not denying the possibility of a multiplicitous self, nor is she stating that the categorial logics must be upheld. Rather she is showing that our identities are spliced due to the power of hegemonic structures (such as the legal system). Before we can advocate for multiplicity, we must confront the epistemic structures in place that prohibit the recognition of multidimensional people. In other words, we need to craft an epistemic framework that complements a need for existential multiplicity. Intersectional theory is an essential first step for the recognition and flourishing of a multiplicitous self.

Intersectionality as Epistemic Resistance

In order to understand how Crenshaw wants intersectionality to be understood, we need to ground ourselves in the theoretical framework she was in when she drafted “Mapping the Margins.” As a legal scholar, Crenshaw is known for her work in critical race theory and feminist legal theory. Critical race theory critiques legal frameworks as being inherently prejudicial due to the racism systemically embedded within legal structures. Likewise, feminist legal theory critiques the ways in which gender has been written into legal code and disenfranchises women and nonmen. Similar to these frameworks, Crenshaw says that intersectionality needs to be understood as a theory that seeks to correct our ways of knowing. Just as legal frameworks organize our way of knowing the law, intersectionality seeks to organize and restructure our ways of knowing concerning social dynamics and epistemology. This also includes addressing the ways of knowing that the legal system does and does not recognize.³ If we conceive of intersectionality as an epistemic framework, then we can see how Crenshaw instead observes how dominant hegemonic structures affect the way in which we know ourselves and our positionality. The main focus is to change how we know and what we know about multidimensional subjects. For example, instead of being seen only as “Black” or “woman,” intersectionality alters our epistemic structures so that we are able to recognize someone who identifies as a “Black woman.”

Intersectionality can also be thought of as a tool of what José Medina calls “epistemic resistance.” This is the use of epistemic resources (primarily community knowledge) to undermine and challenge oppressive normative structures and complacent cognitive functioning (Medina 2013, 3; 16–17). Medina presents in *The Epistemology of Resistance* two essential claims. The first is that the existence of epistemic oppression necessitates epistemic resistance, and, second, that the formation of a “kaleidoscope consciousness” is essential for understanding and recognizing the multiple positions we hold in the world. A kaleidoscope consciousness is what Medina calls the

multidimensional consciousness that is formed when subjects are able to gain knowledge of the positionality of those who belong to intersectional social groups. If we view dominant frameworks as oppressive structures, intersectionality operates as a form of epistemic resistance inasmuch as it is a response to the damage and erasure caused by hegemonic groups. Intersectionality critiques and corrects dominant frameworks for disallowing the recognition of multidimensional subjects. Conceiving of intersectionality as a form of epistemic resistance enables us to see how it leads toward the development of a multiplicitous life, particularly the one that Lugones elucidates in her work.

Crenshaw utilizes intersectionality as a tool to search for and magnify areas where subjects become epistemically invisible. This invisibility leads to a lack of protection that leaves subjects at risk of epistemic harm that violates subjects as knowers of themselves and others and is embedded within dominant ways of knowing. These dominant structures erase subjects who are not part of the hegemonic frameworks that construct social ways of knowing. This liberatory epistemology was prevalent in Black feminist literature during the late 1980s and early 1990s, an example of which can be seen through the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* aims to describe the ways in which Black feminist theory created its own epistemology in order to make the lives and knowledge of Black women legible to dominant frameworks. She writes, "For African-American women, the knowledge gained at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women's critical social theory" (Collins 2000/2009, 11). As it highlights areas of invisibility, intersectionality demonstrates the need to disrupt categorial logics enforced by dominant frameworks. In other words, Crenshaw's theory is not at all antagonistic to the multiplicity that Lugones theorizes. Lugones's work exemplifies accounts of ontological and existential multiplicity, whereas Crenshaw theorizes a notion of epistemic multiplicity.⁴

Epistemic Multiplicity

Although this concept is not the main focus of this essay, I will briefly sketch how I view Crenshaw's theory leading to a conception of epistemic multiplicity. Epistemic multiplicity focuses on altering epistemic frameworks and behavior so that we can combat harmful cognitive functions that lead to privileging certain identities over others. Dominant hegemonic structures that privilege certain identities over others also have the power to *erase* those identities from ways of knowing and social recognition. Before we can make calls for multiplicity, we must create frameworks that allow for the recognition of a combination of categories that do not constitute dominant personas.

Intersectionality does not claim that any combination of identities puts someone at risk of erasure—in other words, intersectionality is not an identity pile-up. There is a difference between the multiple identities that compose a "white Christian cisgender man," and a "Black queer transgender woman." Both people comprise multiple identities, but the first person has multiple identities that are all dominant in Western society, whereas the second person holds multiple marginalized identities. Dominant frameworks will openly recognize and authenticate the experiences of the first individual, whereas the latter will often be forced to pick a specific identity that makes them most legible to hegemonic groups. Therefore, Crenshaw is not saying that race and gender are mutually exclusive categories, but that hegemonic structures view them as such

in order to render certain subjects epistemically invisible.⁵ Intersectional theory (should) focus on socially marginalized identities. As an act of epistemic resistance, people utilize intersectional frameworks once they are shown the violence of colonial logics—that is, the idea that race and gender are separable categories. As Crenshaw states, “intersectionality aims to alleviate the tension between assertions of multiple identity . . . the solution does not entail merely arguing for the multiplicity of identity” (Crenshaw 1991, 1298–99). Before we can construct modes of resistance from multiplicity, we need to combat the complacent cognitive functioning that composes dominant hegemonic frameworks.

II. Lugones’s Account of Fusion

Despite Lugones’s strong critique of intersectionality, her theorizing of fusion is limited to only a few paragraphs within “Radical Multiculturalism.” According to Lugones, fusion interrupts categorial logics and demonstrates the inseparability of categories like race and gender. This concept is greatly needed in order for subjects to see the inseparability of their oppressions. She also critiques intersectionality for not being a meaningful method of resistance. She writes, referring to Crenshaw’s piece, “but seeing the violence while trapped in its logic does not awaken one to resistance to it” (Lugones 2014, 75). I take Lugones to be stating that since intersectionality operates under oppressive logics, it cannot fully enable subjects to create a method of resistance from within the oppressive logics. Rather than viewing the combination of race and gender as a multiple identity, intersectionality, as Lugones interprets it, views these multiple identities only as oppressive. Therefore, one can see the violence done by the categories but be unable to fully engage in resistance to it. However, as I noted in the second section part I, if we perceive intersectionality as an epistemic framework for crafting a method of epistemic resistance, then the work intersectionality performs is absolutely crucial. We need to directly confront oppressive categorial logics in order to engage in meaningful resistance. Additionally, Crenshaw notes repeatedly that intersectionality is compatible with other resistance methods. This seems to indicate that an intersectional framework can be expanded to accommodate other methodologies, including a decolonial lens. As an act of intersectional resistance, Crenshaw is trying to resolve the issue of epistemic erasure and to ensure that subjects are made socially legible. Intersectionality does not leave us at the intersection but enables us to move from being objects to being subjects. This pressures frameworks to acknowledge marginalized subjects and enables us to restructure these frameworks so that we can create resistant knowledge.

Lugones states that fusion “celebrates” modes of coalition that arise from resistance to powers at all levels of oppression, whereas intersectionality seeks only to fragment identities (77). This is because Lugones holds that intersectionality theorizes our situatedness only from the perspective of oppression, which ultimately leads to fragmentation. However, Lugones also claims that resisting at sites of oppression can also lead to the creation of resistant knowledges, so it is not quite clear how intersectionality could not produce the same resistant knowledges as fusion does. She goes on to say that intersectionality shows how oppressions interlock (where identities are shown as fragmented), whereas fusion demonstrates that identities are intermeshed and overlapping. I see Lugones making a semantic argument here regarding the difference between “intersectionality” and “fusion,” but I would argue that we should be concerned with the *function* of intersectionality rather than wordplay. In terms of its operation and

sentiment regarding oppressive logics and a call for resistance, fusion and intersectionality seem to operate simultaneously. Lugones claims that this “intersecting” hides the notion of fusion, and “the claim that Women of Color is an intersectional identity . . . as a move toward alliance or coalition” needs to be observed cautiously (76). I read this warning as either an example of the slippage between “intersectional” and “interconnecting,” or Lugones’s disapproval of the term “women of color.” Either way, I propose that a more holistic and charitable reading of Crenshaw would demonstrate that some of these presuppositions Lugones holds are not the case.

Crenshaw’s Account of Intersectionality

Before I begin comparing Lugones’s reading of “Mapping the Margins” with my own, note that “Mapping the Margins” cannot be fully understood without referencing its predecessor, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (Crenshaw 1989). It is in this piece that Crenshaw presents the groundwork for her theorizing on intersectionality, which is expanded in “Mapping the Margins” (Crenshaw 1991). Analyzing these articles in tandem will allow for a more holistic understanding of Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality and its role in her feminist theorizing.

In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw discusses her intentions behind developing an intersectional framework derived from a Black feminist basis (Crenshaw 1989, 139). She writes, “there is a problematic tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139). Here Crenshaw is critiquing the single-axis frameworks that often constitute antidiscrimination policies (139–40). For example, feminist policies that seek to tackle gender-based discrimination often lack a racial analysis, and, likewise, antiracist policies tend to neglect gender in their analyses. The end result is feminist frameworks that focus primarily on the experiences of white women, and antiracist policies that focus primarily on men of color. The lives and experiences of those at the center of both these issues—those at the intersection—are erased.

The multidimensionality of Black women’s lives, for Crenshaw, exemplifies the need for an epistemic framework that makes multiply marginalized people visible. Black women in particular have been theoretically erased in people’s attempts to enact various feminist and antiracist practices. Crenshaw notes that this is not intentional as much as it is due to an unwillingness to question our perception of nondominant subjects. I would argue that in this essay it is clear that Crenshaw sees identities as multiplicitous but demonstrates that epistemic structures (well-intentioned or not) fracture identities (140). Her writing is also not normative—she is not making claims about how our identities *should* be structured, nor does she claim that marginalized identities are formed at the intersection. The intersection for Crenshaw is not a site of multiplicity, but a site of erasure. In order for dominant hegemonic groups to hold social power over those who are marginalized, they actively work to erase and silence those with multiple marginalized identities. These subjects are made invisible at an intersection that forces them to choose one identity over the other, despite both (or more) being required for them to be seen as full persons. Crenshaw observes that the legal system and its influence on social and political powers affects the interpretive powers we use to understand identity and agency. Intersectionality aims to present an account of how dominant hegemonic groups function in order to properly construct resistant epistemic frameworks to combat harmful cognitive functioning. In other words, “Intersectionality is an analytic disposition, a way of thinking about and conducting analyses” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 795).

Crenshaw notes, “These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). In other words, even if we recognize the oppressive nature of our current cognitive functioning when it comes to analyzing identity, the solution is not merely to include those designated as “other.” This is because the epistemic framework in question is not designed to protect and recognize these bodies; therefore, the solution is to construct *new* frameworks that enable subjects to be recognized as multidimensional and resistant. It is not enough to critique the framework; we must work to change it. In this way, Lugones is correct that resistance does not occur merely by witnessing the violence displayed by categorial logics. However, as Medina argues in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, subjects first need to acknowledge their oppression before they can actively resist it epistemically. Crenshaw’s theory operates as a mode of highlighting absences so that subjects can become aware of how dominant structures have erased and silenced them. We need an analysis that keeps intersectionality as a source of its structure, not an afterthought. If it doesn’t do this, then it cannot adequately incorporate the experiences of multidimensional subjects.

The most notable court case that Crenshaw analyzes in “Demarginalizing the Intersection” is *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*. This infamous lawsuit alleged that General Motors exhibited discrimination when it came to hiring and promoting Black women. The court ruled that no discrimination had occurred since General Motors had hired women (who were white) and Black people (who were men). In other words, the court refused to acknowledge that it was possible to recognize discrimination against more than one marginalized group simultaneously. The legal system was unable to acknowledge a suit based on race- *and* gender-based discrimination—the majority ruling was that plaintiffs would need to choose either one or the other. This is a primary example of how hegemonic frameworks seek to disenfranchise and erase subjects. By saying that Black women could not be discriminated against, the legal system also ruled that they could not be protected by the law (Crenshaw 1989, 142). Denying the intersectional experiences of Black women, these structures effectively deny the full authentication of people’s identities (150). The system does not merely overlook the experiences of Black women, Crenshaw argues, it actively erases it. Intersectionality demonstrates how dominant ways of thinking affect how we view others, their experiences, and their situatedness in the world.

Despite common misconceptions, “Mapping the Margins” is not Crenshaw’s initial theorizing about intersectionality but a conclusion to “Demarginalizing the Intersection.” In her first piece, she sought to theorize epistemic erasure, which occurs at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Her second piece aims to further explore the operations of the intersection and to “advance the telling of that location by exploring the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color” (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). By exploring the operations of the intersection, Crenshaw expands on her conception of intersectionality by critiquing the operations of dominant ways of thinking and knowing. Even with this theorizing, she notes that intersectionality is not “a new totalizing theory of identity” (1244), but rather it aims to demonstrate the effects of harmful epistemic structures. Again, this demonstrates that Crenshaw does not believe social identities are formed within the intersection. The intersection is an area of social life that cannot be comprehended by dominant frameworks, and so those frameworks designate it as “empty.” This means that the experiences and lives of those who *do* inhabit the intersection are deemed illegible by dominant groups. The conception of identities as “intersectional” or “fused” is meaningless unless we

challenge and alter the epistemic structures that render groups socially invisible. From here Crenshaw notes that the failure of identity politics is not in its inability to transcend difference—as Lugones argues—but that intragroup differences are erased or ignored (1242).

Decoloniality, as Lugones theorizes it, is not incompatible with intersectionality. In fact, there is great potential for the two theories to work in tandem. As an epistemic tool, intersectionality works to find subjects rendered socially invisible by dominant frameworks. These dominant frameworks operate under the guise that identities formed by social categories (such as race and gender) are mutually exclusive. Decolonial theory then operates to deconstruct these logics as being used by colonial regimes to subjugate and dehumanize subjects. At any rate, if our goal is to change or replace these dominant frameworks, the epistemic critique that intersectionality presents is crucial. It is not enough just to critique the structures; we must develop an imaginative resistance within our epistemology to create new structures. These structures are infused with the tenet of intersectionality and aim to view subjects as multiple. The combination of decolonial theory and intersectionality allows for the production of a methodology that makes subjects epistemically visible, in addition to critiquing colonial logics. Additionally, Crenshaw writes that the marginalization of women of color is not due just to the dominant frameworks of race and gender—here we can insert issues of class, ability, sexual orientation, citizenship, and so on (1245).

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Crenshaw’s theorizing in “Mapping the Margins” is not within the essay itself, but in her ninth footnote. She writes:

I consider intersectionality a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable. (1244)

Even though intersectionality engages with the assumption that race and gender are separable categories, it ultimately demonstrates the urgent need for multidimensional frameworks and ways of knowing. If the categories overlap into an intersection (that is, a site of social erasure), then these categories are not separable. The “empty site” exists only because dominant structures do not want to recognize subjects, not because those subjects do not actually exist.

Crenshaw repeatedly and openly calls her work a Black feminist project. This project is rooted in the work of Black women and nonmen dating back to the late seventeenth century. It is not accurate to anoint Crenshaw the sole creator of intersectionality, nor is it fair to burden her with all the criticisms that the theory faces. Critiques of intersectionality attack not only Crenshaw, but the work of figures such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Mary McLeod Bethune, and many other Black feminist theorists.

Furthermore, Crenshaw mentions the need for embracing multiplicity at least three times in “Mapping the Margins”:

My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. (Crenshaw 1991, 1245)

[R]ace and gender converge so that the concerns of minority women fall in the void between concerns about women's issues and concerns about racism. But when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened. (1282)

Yet intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity. . . . The solution does not merely entail arguing for the multiplicity of identities. (1296; 1298–99)

These excerpts show that Crenshaw agrees that there is an urgent need for the same type of multiplicity that Lugones calls for in “Radical Multiculturalism.” Additionally, she notes that various postmodern theories (that is, decoloniality) have been useful in exploring how power is clustered around these constructs and utilized against others (1296). The failure of methodologies to incorporate intersectional theory into their frameworks causes them to replicate and reinforce oppressive logics. Crenshaw, Sumi Cho, and Leslie McCall argue that “some of what circulates as critical debate about what intersectionality is or does reflects a lack of engagement with both originating and contemporary literatures on intersectionality” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 788). As May muses in *Pursuing Intersectionality*, it is crucial that we critically examine common beliefs and conclusions reached about intersectionality to address dominant interpretive powers (May 2015, 100). Due to many misperceptions—intentional or not—surrounding her theory, Crenshaw has now turned to depicting intersectionality as a type of “gaze.” Dominant frameworks impose certain gazes upon individuals and standardize these perceptions of others onto other beings and incorporate them into our ways of knowing. Crenshaw proposes that intersectional theory work to expand and enrich our gazes so that we can better understand and highlight social erasure.

The Danger of Epistemic Erasure within Liberatory Frameworks

My analysis of both Crenshaw's and Lugones's methodologies has led me to conclude that Lugones has critically misunderstood Crenshaw. I am not interested in critiquing Lugones's position so much as I am concerned with demonstrating that her underlying claims align with Crenshaw's. In some ways both theorists are talking past each other in terms of their audiences and specific aims, yet their proposed concepts of fusion and intersectionality are not incompatible or mutually exclusive. Lugones has also ignored the Black feminist framework whence Crenshaw derives her theory. Pinning the “errors” of intersectionality solely on Crenshaw erases the work and legacies of the Black women who helped create the space for Crenshaw to theorize this work.

Additionally, the criticisms raised in “Radical Multiculturalism” do not engage with any of Crenshaw's contemporary work—all of Lugones's critiques are based on an article that was more than two decades old at the time Lugones was writing. Not engaging with Crenshaw's more recent work on this topic weakens Lugones's criticisms. Although “Mapping the Margins” is still cited by thousands of scholars to this day, it alone does not fully demonstrate Crenshaw's conception of intersectionality. Three additional articles that would have been helpful in Lugones's construction of Crenshaw's theory are: “Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward” (Crenshaw 2011); “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013); and “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory” (Carbado et al. 2013).

Crenshaw discusses several if not all facets of Lugones's critiques within these pieces as well as within "Mapping the Margins" itself, which I have sought to demonstrate.

Even though Lugones argues that we must "move beyond intersectionality," she still uses facets of intersectionality to critique it. Lugones charges Crenshaw with not questioning the categorial logics behind race and gender. Yet her proposed theory of "fusion" performs essentially the same work as intersectionality, but under a different title. She describes intersectionality as "colluding with white feminism" solely because she conflates intersectionality with an identity theory. Lugones's critique essentially amounts to asserting the need for a different word for intersectionality, but one that still critiques the same logics that intersectionality seeks to address. The decolonial work Lugones theorizes is beyond where Crenshaw was in her work at the time of writing "Mapping the Margins." However, this is because, although they were both concerned with harmful epistemic frameworks, they theorized two different effects of these hegemonic structures; Lugones was concerned with colonial logics and Crenshaw was theorizing epistemic silencing.

I will close this section of my essay with an anecdote from Crenshaw's keynote lecture at the Barbara Jordan Seminar in 2018. In a talk entitled "The Urgency of Intersectionality: Race & Gender in Work, Life, and Politics," she discussed what led her to write "Mapping the Margins," and offered a new way of thinking about intersectionality as an issue of framing. She also reinforced her theorization from a Black feminist framework. She noted that although intersectionality isn't just about Black women, "it's never not about them either" (Crenshaw 2018). During the question and answer segment, she was asked about her views about the criticism that intersectionality upholds categorial logics and does not offer a meaningful space for resistance:

I'm not really an academic, I just play one on TV. What I really am, is a problem-solver . . . I look for social injustices that don't have a name, and *language* makes things visible. Language is composed of categories and we communicate through these categories. We need a framework to intervene in our language and ways of knowing. I don't know what to say about the theoretical aspect of the criticism, but I do know one thing: I'm not concerned about the theory. I look at the applications, how things work on the ground. In the communities I'm in, and for the people I work with, *intersectionality works*. So, until those people come to me and say they're worried I'm "imposing categorial logics" on them, I'm going to continue advocating for intersectionality. (Crenshaw 2018)

III. Epistemic Erasure and Maintaining Colonial Logics

Besides the common misreading of Crenshaw's work, another issue lurks around the rising critiques against intersectionality. This is that critics will dismiss intersectionality by noting that it is not intersectional/multidimensional enough, when the impact of intersectional thinking is not what is garnered from high theory. By saying "intersectionality works," I take Crenshaw to be stating that intersectionality is meant to be practiced in action, not simply rigorously theorized. She is ultimately concerned with providing a new epistemic structure that gives legibility to marginalized subjects. Theoretically, it may be possible to observe intersectionality as maintaining categories of oppression, but as theorists we should always recognize that our theory and vision of its practice may not align. Such is the case with intersectionality, yet rather than being destructive, it leads to the creation of various spaces and movements calling

for the end to various types of oppression. The main threat that both Black feminism and decolonial theory face is the epistemic erasure that occurs with the misappropriation of their individual ideologies. For Black feminism this occurs with the extraction and decontextualization of the embodied knowledge of Black women and nonmen. Theories such as intersectionality are integral to the Black feminist tradition, and by not taking appropriate care in theorizing Crenshaw's work, Lugones has effectively erased the Black feminist influences from Crenshaw's theorizing. Crenshaw's theory is then reshaped and harvested for Lugones's concept of fusion, which differs in no significant way from intersectionality, and fits the type of epistemic backlash that May highlighted.

To claim that we must "move beyond intersectionality" is to commit a grave injustice against the Black women whose work is integral to decolonial theory. "Moving beyond intersectionality" implies that we are actively trying to displace a methodology that aims to critique epistemic frameworks and make marginalized subjects visible. To extract a concept from Black feminism, only to erase the bodies of the Black women who have put it forth, is an act of epistemic violence of the highest degree. By misrepresenting intersectionality and putting the onus on Crenshaw for its "failure," Lugones has effectively woven colonial logics within her decolonial theory. The methodology that Lugones produces has stripped Black women from a theory that was made to make them visible, only to be rendered such that it no longer holds their bodies or experiences. The end result is a theory that is anything but "decolonial," and certainly not one that all women of color can practice.

Conclusion: Reflections on the Intersectionality Debates

In this essay I have sought to do three things: first, to engage in a critical discussion of Lugones's "Radical Multiculturalism and Women of Color Feminisms," concerning primarily her critique of intersectionality. I presented core aspects of her critiques and responded to them by noting her misunderstanding of Crenshaw's theory as an epistemic framework. Second, I recounted Crenshaw's argument in "Mapping the Margins" and noted that Crenshaw addressed several of Lugones's criticisms in her 1991 text. Despite this, I continued my investigations and juxtaposed Lugones's proposed concept of "fusion" with intersectionality, as Lugones claimed fusion would supersede intersectionality as a decolonial method. However, after viewing both concepts simultaneously, I concluded that not only they are compatible, but that intersectionality is needed in order to create new and healthy epistemic frameworks. Considering that Crenshaw is concerned with epistemic erasure, we will need to critique current dominant structures and create new epistemic structures that will not fragment marginalized subjects or erase their experiences. Finally, I discussed that although Lugones aims to present a new tool in her decolonial feminism, her theorizing ultimately commits an act of epistemic erasure against Black feminism. By accusing intersectionality of "colluding with white feminism," Lugones effectively precludes any possibility of intersectionality operating as a decolonial method.

May posits, at the urging of Angela Davis, that we must continue to ask why the intellectual contributions of women of color continue to be appropriated without any reference to their larger literatures (May 2014, 107). I argue that this misappropriation, as I have demonstrated, occurs even within decolonial theory, which ultimately aims to escape all forms and manifestations of colonial logic. Although Black women and intellectuals are cited in many decolonial works, the work of Black women is rarely—if ever

—presented on its own as a contribution to decolonial theory. Therein lies a very fruitful project if more theorists were to engage with Black feminism in an authentic way that not only honors its predecessors but secures its future as a framework that continues to end epistemic erasure and formulate coalitions across differences.

Intersectional theory spans ontological, epistemological, ethical, existential, and phenomenological frameworks and has recently become associated with critical theory. Intersectionality critiques have continued to rise in popularity—as seen in the work of Jennifer Nash and Tommy Curry—and it is important that we think carefully about all liberatory frameworks. Nevertheless, this entails examining intersectionality *intersectionally*, meaning that critiquing intersectional analyses with single-axis frameworks only serves to demonstrate the need for this theory. As a heuristic tool, intersectional theory is a project in the making, and it is up to theorists to utilize, define, and enact how we see intersectionality in the world. As scholars and activists who are committed to the liberation of all oppressed and dispossessed people, we owe it to ourselves, and to those who have yet to come, to engage critically, but authentically, with this methodology. The only way we can “move beyond intersectionality” is by taking seriously the change it demands and by fully dismantling single-axis logics and frameworks.

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Notes

- 1 Although I do not fully explicate Lugones’s arguments for this position, I will point to earlier pieces by her, such as “Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” and “Methodological Notes toward a Decolonial Feminism” (Lugones 2007; 2011), which she uses to ground her early theorizing on the relation between colonial powers and categorial logic. Because Lugones holds the position that “woman” is a colonial construct, she argues that it can refer *only* to white women. “Woman of color,” therefore, is a nonsensical term as it refers to a collective of people not registered in colonial/categorial logics.
- 2 Crenshaw states, “Understanding intersectionality as a work-in-progress suggests that it makes little sense to frame the concept as a contained entity.” I take her to again be advocating for the integration of multi-axis thinking into all theorization and frameworks; see Carbado et al. 2013, 303.
- 3 This is due to a refusal rather than an inability to address the needs of marginalized identities and individuals.
- 4 This epistemic multiplicity, I imagine, is similar to Medina’s notion of a kaleidoscope consciousness. It is the ability to know oneself and others as complex, multidimensional subjects.
- 5 This is necessary for understanding why Crenshaw focuses on the epistemic erasure that occurs within the legal system, as this framework often determines the legal protections certain individuals are afforded.

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