Gender and Race, Intersectionality
Theory of
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As a field, anthropology has a long-standing commitment to overcoming ethnocentrism and to disrupting beliefs of cultural and ethnic supremacy. Despite this commitment and ongoing concerns around inequalities linked to racial difference, critical discussions of gender and race, including how they operate within a broader milieu of social difference, remain largely outside mainstream anthropology. A select few anthropological journals (e.g., Transforming Anthropology) are expressly committed to publishing work that interrogates relationships between inequality and gendered forms of social difference. The observation that critical engagement with race and gender resides primarily at the periphery of the discipline points to a deeper and embedded concern: that anthropology remains preoccupied with notions of binary difference, the effects of which are far reaching.

According to Tami Navarro, Bianca Williams, and Attiya Ahmad (2013), the narrow notion of difference embedded within the discipline is an outgrowth of anthropologists’ disciplinary self-conception as researchers distinct from the communities (or others) they study. This stance, in turn, comes to inform the differential treatment of those who do anthropological research. For example, mainstream anthropology tends to conflate women of color “with their research agendas—that is, the assumption that these scholars are necessarily speaking from a ‘native’ position—and systematically disadvantage women anthropologists of color” (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013, 444). As such, other, more interdisciplinary, fields, including ethnic, gender, and cultural studies, are often more inclusive of ethnographers of color, particularly those researching transnational or marginalized communities in the United States and other industrialized Western countries (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013, 445). In short, there can be a distinct epistemological difference. Work by anthropologists of color is often not readily legible to a traditional anthropological gaze, because it emerges from a different vantage point that is not premised upon a binary notion of difference.

Unpacking mainstream anthropology’s uneasy relationship with the interconnections between raced and gendered dynamics requires considering the discipline’s relationships to its subjects of study (or others) as well as those who practice anthropology but do not readily fit into binary categories of difference—notably, albeit not exclusively, women of color. “Intersectionality,” a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is a common framework employed to unveil these distinct forms of marginalization. In her early formulations of intersectionality, Crenshaw explains how black women in the United States occupy the intersection of two axes of subordination,
race and gender. They stand figuratively at the point where race and gender overlap. This observation builds earlier recognitions of the multiple oppressions that women of color navigate, such as work by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1983), which evoked the importance of such intersections and directly influenced feminist anthropological thinking. Crenshaw (1991, 1245) elaborates on the three dimensions of intersectionality: (1) structural intersectionality, which involves the forms of subordination that render the experiences of women of color qualitatively different from those of white women or men of color; (2) political intersectionality, which entails practices that fail to acknowledge how the position of women of color is distinct (including antiracist and feminist coalitions that evoke one axis of subordination); and (3) representational intersectionality, which captures the discursive and symbolic practices that perpetuate the (in)visibility of women of color. Combined, these three dimensions have profound and embodied implications for women of color in everyday life. Accordingly, Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality lends well to thinking through how individual people endure forms of subordination differently.

While intersectionality's emphasis on unpacking the subordination of individual persons is often evoked as its strength, it also makes it the subject of critique. Feminist scholars, for instance, contend that transnational relationships yield complicated inequalities that surpass individuals and axes of subordination. Using the US war on terror as an example, Jasbir Puar (2005) details the convergence of modernity, inequality, violence, sexuality, and xenophobia, which cannot be understood as separate forces colliding at an intersection or as embodied by an individual experience. Instead, the nonlinearity of these logics exceeds intersectionality's focus on identity. Anthropological work grounded in in-depth fieldwork with local communities makes a similar point through a different mode of critique. Anthropologists have documented a number of cultural orientations that do not value the individuated person in the way that Western standpoints presume. The individual—or a notion of a singular self—is thus not necessarily the given starting point for conceptions of personhood, making identity-centered analyses problematic in many contexts.

In response to these concerns, other feminist ethnographers suggest the need to reframe intersectionality in a way that is attentive to contextual concerns and their transnational dimensions, especially in light of more recent feminist scholarship on intersectionality (Henne and Troshynski 2013; Patil 2013). Although Crenshaw's (1989) original metaphor for intersectionality invoked cars entering a traffic intersection in her discussion of US discrimination law, it is not the only way to conceive of such paths, particularly if heeding Vrushali Patil's (2013) advice that Crenshaw's work is only one particular kind of "domestic intersectionality" targeting legal landscapes in the United States. With this in mind, Kathryn Henne and Emily Troshynski (2013) acknowledge that there are various kinds of travel across the globe, each shaped by different histories, norms, structures, and patterns of traffic. They point to an array of co-constitutive relationships that inform the shape and nature of intersectionality in different spaces, suggesting that a key challenge for ethnographic scholarship is to document and query how different peoples are situated within them.

Taken together, the aforementioned observations reflect broader scholarly critiques leveled at the academic representations of marginalized peoples, doing so in a way
that speaks to concerns about the depictions of non-Western people and contexts. In calling for a “decolonized” anthropology, Faye Harrison (1991, 3) argues that counter-hegemonic strategies are imperative if scholars are to rethink the “race, gender, and class inequalities at the heart of the world system,” which, in turn, shape ethnographic research. She calls for confronting entrenched colonial legacies that frame not only intersectional concerns but also academic knowledge production more generally. In calling attention to these dynamics, Harrison echoes other black feminist observations that have questioned the values of academic knowledge production. For example, Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 753) contends that scholarship tends to rely upon a “Eurocentric masculinist criteria for methodological adequacy,” a critique that mainstream anthropology does not escape, even though it is committed to the study of difference (Harrison 1991; Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013). For Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad (2013, 445), this is an embedded feature of anthropology, which “continues to rely on the assumption of a white, male researcher venturing into the unknown as the neutral anthropological position.” Thus, although the crisis of representation within anthropology may have disrupted the means through which we think about and approach ethnography, it has not destabilized the gendered and raced characteristics of the discipline’s foundational standpoint. The consequences of this vantage point transcend scholarly outputs; it carries over into academic labor and who become accepted as academic laborers. More specifically, “faculty who complicate or challenge this disciplinary identity (either by existing outside of this race/gender/class position or pursuing research among communities with which they have preexisting ties) often face marginalization and fare poorly within anthropology departments” (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013, 445).

Intersectional scholarship, particularly black feminist intellectual thought, has a tradition of articulating narratives that both reveal and counter the postcolonial underpinnings of orthodox knowledge production. In fact, more generally, as Grace Kyungwon Hong (2008, 100) explains, “because the racial project of Western civilization was always a gendered and sexualized project,” black feminism is preoccupied with “the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class within the context of global colonial capitalism.” Scholarship has been central to these larger projects, prompting other scholars to question not only the connections between who has access to academic knowledge but also the politics of how it is created (Christian 1994). For Barbara Christian (1994), a shift in the foundational politics of knowledge is necessary to enable more women of color to enter into and to influence mainstream disciplines.

In light of these tensions, what then does—and can—intersectionality offer anthropology? Intersectionality, when critically considered, offers an important check for our analyses, one that helps us to “make sure that we do not speak for those who cannot speak or ask others to share our agenda while they wait for their own” (Grillo 1995, 30). Anthropologists of color have already detailed the marginalizing politics of anthropology through conceptual and ethnographic accounts. Intersectionality offers one mode of critically interrogating and checking the production of ethnographic knowledge. In short, it provides another reflexive strategy, one that forces a rethinking of the kinds of difference at the heart of ethnographic engagement.
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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


