Who owns intersectionality?
Some reflections on feminist debates on how theories travel

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Abstract
Feminist scholars have increasingly expressed their worries about the depoliticization of intersectionality since it has travelled from its point of origin in US Black feminist theory to the shores of Europe. They have argued that the subject for which the theory was intended has been displaced, that Black feminists have been excluded from the discussion, and that white European feminists have usurped all the credit for intersectionality as theory. Intersectionality has been transformed into a product of the neoliberal academy rather than the helpmeet for social justice it was meant to be. This article explores three of the bones of contention in these debates about intersectionality and its travels. The author argues that they rest on notions of ownership that, while understandable, are untenable and, ultimately, counterproductive. A case will be made for taking a less proprietary stance toward critical theories and instead treating the travels of intersectionality as an occasion for dialogue rather than a contest over ownership.

Keywords
Black feminism, borrowing, cannibalism, faithful reading, ‘intersectionality wars’, originalism, race and racism, travelling theory

In 2009, a conference was organized in Frankfurt to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the concept ‘intersectionality’, which has played a central role in contemporary gender studies and feminist scholarship (Lutz et al., 2011). The conference was very well attended, with 300 participants and 14 speakers from different parts of Europe and the US. The guest of honour was the US legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the ‘mother’ of the concept (p. 1). The conference was held in a celebratory mode, yet its aim was also to address the
challenges facing intersectionality research. The international speakers were invited to think critically about the ambiguities in intersectional theory, the differences in the ways it had been applied in a range of locations and disciplinary fields, and the directions it should move in the future. While the origins of intersectionality in US Black feminist scholarship were acknowledged by one and all, the focus of most of the contributions was on how to use and adapt intersectionality for understanding the complexities of social inequalities outside the US. Particular attention was given to some of the challenges of using intersectionality to investigate ‘race’ and racism in a European context where their meanings and histories have had different trajectories than in the US.

In her postscript to the conference proceedings, the guest of honour, Crenshaw, indicated some of her concerns about how intersectionality had been taken up in Europe, suggesting that it may be necessary to revisit its ‘initial iteration’ or its ‘origins’ (Crenshaw, 2011: 223). She admitted that her own project had not been to evaluate intersectionality as a theory and, indeed, all of the discussions about its objectives, dynamics and trajectories were, as she put it, ‘quite foreign to my own sensibilities about intersectionality’ (p. 222). She proceeded to explain how she had used the concept in 1989 and why it had been a critical intervention in her own discipline (critical legal studies) and how it had been designed to address the specific issue of Black women’s marginalization. In her view, all the meta-talk about the possibilities and pitfalls of intersectionality as theory or method went beyond what intersectionality had ever claimed to be. In fact, all it was ever intended to be was ‘just’ a heuristic device for illuminating discriminatory situations (p. 232).

In other publications, Crenshaw had already expressed her dismay using even stronger terms, claiming that she could hardly recognize the concept because its meaning had been so distorted or inverted through unfaithful or careless reading (Crenshaw in Guidroz and Berger, 2009: 65). Crenshaw’s concerns have been echoed by many other scholars working in the burgeoning field of intersectionality studies, who have, in different ways, expressed their worries about what has happened to intersectionality, particularly since it has wafted over to European shores from the US.1 Its radical beginnings have been obliterated (Salem, 2018). The subject for whom it was initially intended (marginalized woman of colour) has been displaced (Lewis, 2013). Black feminists have not been properly cited or represented, while white, neoliberal European feminists have usurped all the credit for intersectionality as theory (Tomlinson, 2013a). Intersectionality has been whitened, depoliticized, and transformed into a product of the neoliberal academy rather than the helpmeet for social justice it was meant to be (May, 2014). In short, the corruption of intersectionality and the urgent need to restore it to its original (pure?) state have become the subject of what the US scholar Jennifer Nash (2019) has aptly called the ‘intersectionality wars’. This state of affairs not only raises the issue of what should be done about intersectionality, but, more generally, how we should view the transnational circulation of ideas and theories in a globalizing world and what this means for how critical feminist scholars ought to think about the ownership and uses of the knowledge we produce and disseminate.

I am, by no means, an uninterested observer of this debate and, indeed, I have a vested interest in its outcome. I have written about intersectionality’s travels, and this work has been the subject, albeit indirectly, of some of the criticisms levelled at
European intersectionality studies. And, as a white European feminist working, as most scholars on both sides of the Atlantic do, in the neoliberal academy, I have often felt uncomfortable and, at times, unfairly maligned by the characterizations of European critics of intersectionality as white managerial feminists with a neoliberal agenda (Bilge, 2013; Tomlinson, 2018) who have, wittingly or unwittingly, depoliticized the concept. Like many European intersectionality scholars, I have never treated intersectionality as synonymous with neoliberal programmes for ‘diversity management’, but always as a critical methodology for complicating gender and other socially constructed differences, analysing structured configurations of power, and engaging in (self-)critical, situated research (Davis, 2014). However, the fact that the characterization doesn’t fit me or other European intersectionality scholars does not mean that the debate about what has happened to intersectionality once it left the US should not be waged. On the contrary, I am, and have always been, firmly committed to the importance of discussion for the development of critical feminist theory, particularly when issues are controversial and evoke strong emotional responses. It is, therefore, in the spirit of engaging in a constructive and productive dialogue about issues which are important for feminist scholars on both sides of the Atlantic that I have written this article.

After a brief look at ‘intersectionality’s’ transatlantic travels, I will explore three bones of contention in the debates about intersectionality and its travels. This will be followed by a critical look at the ways that the ownership of intersectionality is implicitly claimed in these debates. For example, to what extent does the concept of intersectionality belong to the person who first coined it? Who has the right to make use of it once it is out in the world and, to what ends, may they legitimately use it? In conclusion, a case will be made for taking a less proprietary stance toward critical theories, more generally, and, instead, treating theories and their travels as an occasion for dialogue rather than as a contest over ownership.

**Intersectionality in the US**

The concept of intersectionality initially emerged in the USA during the early 1980s in the context of Black feminist critiques of the lack of attention to issues of race and racism within feminism and gender studies. While Crenshaw is generally given credit for having coined the term ‘intersectionality’, the issues she was addressing were hardly new. Black feminists and US Third World feminist scholars had already produced numerous critiques of how the experiences of women of colour had been neglected in feminist discourse, underscoring the importance of theorizing intersecting identities and sources of oppression. For many, intersectionality has always been, and should continue to be, synonymous with US Black feminist theory. Yet, from its inception, the concept has been taken up in gender studies and feminist theory and, to a lesser degree, in other disciplines. The concept has moved beyond the academy, becoming a buzzword in organizations wishing to ‘diversify’, in NGOs, and in social movements where activists label themselves ‘intersectional’. And, last but not least, intersectionality has moved beyond the borders of the US, becoming – as one scholar noted – the ‘the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far’ (McCall, 2005: 1771).
In 2013, a celebratory issue on intersectionality of the US feminist journal *Signs* was published in which the editors described intersectionality as a full-fledged field: ‘intersectionality studies’ (Cho et al., 2013). They proceeded to map how intersectionality had been used in research and teaching, the debates about what the theory should include or exclude, how it could be used as a methodology. They then turned to the critique that had emerged concerning how intersectionality had been taken up within and outside the academy, expressing particular concern with what had happened to the concept of ‘intersectionality’ once it had left the confines of the US.

**Transatlantic travels**

Many of the reasons that intersectionality took off in Europe were the same as the reasons for its popularity in the US. European feminist scholars also wanted to think about gender in more complicated ways, theorize multiple identities, and give a voice to those who were the most marginalized in society. But intersectionality was not just taken up by European feminists. It was also elaborated in order to address issues deemed important in a European context – issues that had to do with different histories of domination and exclusion as well as the current realities of Europe, particularly in the wake of processes of migration and relocation which are now taking place.6

It was the issue of race and the project of making Black women’s experiences visible through intersectional analysis which was to become the most contentious in the transatlantic debate about intersectionality. In an influential article in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, Knapp (2005) argued that the triad ‘race/class/gender’ has different meanings for European feminists than for US feminists. Given the history of the term ‘race’ and its role in justifying the genocide of millions of racialized others, it feels so tainted to many Europeans that it is unthinkable that an affirmative notion of race could ever be employed as a basis for a progressive politics of identity. Some European feminist scholars have argued that categories like ethnicity, religion, tradition and national belonging may be more useful for understanding current inequalities and exclusions than race. Especially since 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia, it is often the Muslim who is regarded as the most marginalized subject in the European context. Unsurprisingly, a large proportion of recent articles submitted to the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* have been focused on Muslim women in Europe as most likely to be the victims of exclusion and discrimination, making them, therefore, the privileged subjects for European intersectional analysis (Davis and Zarkov, 2017).

This uneasiness about ‘race’ does not, of course, preclude the necessity for European feminists to address the issues of race and racism in Europe, as kennedy-mcfoy and Lewis (2014) point out in a special issue of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* devoted to race and anti-race in Europe. They, along with other European scholars, expressed their concern that the importance and continued relevance of race and racism for understanding past and current European relations of power were being minimized or relegated to the margins in intersectionality studies with its search for other (more?) relevant categories (Erel et al., 2010; Lewis, 2013). It was ultimately the issue of race and its denial that sparked heated and even acrimonious discussions on the
other side of the Atlantic, culminating in the call to ‘rescue’ intersectionality from its European interlocutors.

I will now turn to what I see as the three main bones of contention in the transatlantic intersectionality debates. The first concerns the way Crenshaw’s initial formulation of intersectionality was read; the second, who should be the primary subject of intersectional analysis; and the third, who the theory itself should belong to.

(Mis)reading Crenshaw

Crenshaw is invariably given credit for having coined the term intersectionality and, indeed, I have yet to encounter any text on intersectionality that does not acknowledge her foundational role in introducing the concept. Her two articles from 1989 and 1991 are referred to as the inaugural or foundational texts on intersectionality, although many scholars also cite the long tradition of Black feminist scholarship that provided the context for the concept (see also Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins and Bilge, 2016). Subsequent texts on intersectionality generally give extensive reviews of Crenshaw’s arguments before going on to elaborate or criticize them. Nevertheless, many scholars, including Crenshaw herself, express concern that her work has been ignored, misread, misunderstood and distorted.

While European scholars are not the only ones guilty of having too hastily referenced Crenshaw or failing to understand her intentions, the problem is regarded as ‘particularly acute in Europe’ (Tomlinson, 2013a: 266). Continental European feminists are regarded as having a ‘certain propensity toward overly academic contemplation’ (Bilge, 2013: 411) whereby they have immediately turned to meta-theoretical discussions about the shortcomings of intersectionality theory and have, therefore, missed the insights that were already articulated so well by Crenshaw. Crenshaw’s ideas are misconstrued as nothing new and ‘simply there for the taking’ by opportunistic interlopers (May, 2014: 104). Bilge (2013) cites the much-maligned conference in Frankfurt as an example of how intersectionality was robbed of its origins and treated as something that was already ‘in the air’ (p. 414).

Barbara Tomlinson (2013b) is, perhaps, the most vociferous in her critique of the ‘careless readings’ of Crenshaw which have so failed to do justice to the author’s intentions (p. 996). She argues that (European) intersectionality scholars are guilty of not reflecting on Crenshaw’s original arguments and ‘fostering’ the critique she set out to make. Rather they have taken up her arguments ‘anachronistically’ by reading them through the lens of the debates of the past two decades (p. 1007). Moving away from the original text has led to the promotion of ‘partial truths’ and rhetorical distortions that, consequently, interfere with our (sic) ‘ability to tell the truth’ (p. 1013), whereby ‘our’ seems to refer here to those US scholars who, unlike their European sisters, have not engaged in anachronistic debates but have stayed in close touch with the original text. Given what is perceived as a cavalier treatment of Crenshaw’s texts, it is not surprising that the critiques of intersectionality’s reception in Europe often end with a plea to reconnect ‘intersectionality with its initial vision’ (Bilge, 2013: 405) and re-engage with the ‘originating’ literature on intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013: 788).
In her perceptive analysis of recent intersectionality debates, Nash (2016: 4) calls this insistence on returning to the inaugural formulation of intersectionality ‘originalism’; i.e. the tendency to assess all later feminist work on intersectionality in terms of how loyal it is to the original. Champions of originalism are invested in textual fidelity and the belief that latter-day scholars should remain faithful to the original text. Foundational articles are regarded as containing a singular, unassailable and fundamental truth that can only be ascertained through close and sustained reading. Critics – and this refers only to those who are critical of Crenshaw’s work and never to those who are critical of the critics of Crenshaw – who do not engage in faithful readings are dismissed as distorting and inverting the true meaning of the text. Thus, critique is not regarded as generative, but rather as hindering the analytic capacities of the original and can, therefore, be construed as an act of violence. Rescue work becomes necessary in order to protect intersectionality and return it to its initial forcefulness and vibrancy (Nash, 2016: 7–8).

In Nash’s view, originalism is problematic for two reasons. First, it rests on a fantasy that theories remain intact, whereas any reading of a theory, even one which is positive and ostensibly loyal, will invariably rework the original and generate new meanings. Second, it is problematic because it is not conducive to reflexivity about one’s real agenda. Nash argues that US intersectionality scholars, by situating themselves as rescuers, are being dishonest about their real concerns – concerns that have to do with the hegemonic position of the US academy that has facilitated both the mainstreaming of intersectionality and its travels abroad. Thus, Nash not only wants to curtail what she sees as an unproductive discussions about originalism, but she wants – in particular – for US scholars to be more reflexive and explicit about their own political agendas.

Who is the rightful subject?

The failure to sufficiently acknowledge the original text is not the only bone of contention in the intersectionality debates. A second one is whether women of colour should be the primary subjects of any intersectional analysis, both in terms of focus and as knowledge producers. The worry here is that by employing intersectionality to analyse other identities, women of colour will be supplanted as the rightful empirical and epistemological subjects of intersectional analysis.

An illustration of this problem was provided by Gail Lewis (2013), drawing upon her experiences at the Frankfurt conference ‘Celebrating Intersectionality’. Situating herself as a woman of colour displaced by white European feminists, she describes her discomfort with the presentations at the conference. Although she had herself been invited to give a keynote at the conference, she had been unable to contribute. Nevertheless, in view of her experiences at the conference, she felt compelled to write a critique of the conference in *Signs* (2013; see also Lewis, 2009). In her view, this conference was just one more example of the ‘old tensions between white feminists and feminists of colour’ (2013: 874) where it was impossible to talk about the ‘toxic effects of racialization’ that were ‘emotionally alive in the here-and-now’ (p. 883). She substantiated this with the observation that ‘those who cannot avoid knowing they are raced subjects might have felt uncomfortable and silenced’ and that this silencing can occur even in the midst of debates about the impact of race on people’s lives, about how and in what ways the
meaning of race might change at different times and in different places, and about when and where race is useful as a central analytic concept (p. 883).

While Lewis did not provide concrete examples of how she and others had been silenced at the conference, her account of her discomfort struck a chord. It resonated with the experiences of women of colour feeling invisible, marginalized and devoid of any potential to contribute to feminist debates. Lewis’s critique of the Frankfurt conference was taken up and repeated in the US as proof that these exclusions were a particularly European problem, whereby the lived experiences and circumstances of women of colour were being displaced from intersectional analysis in Europe, European scholars of colour were apparently not authorized to speak about race, and white European feminists were actively participating in a ‘regime of racial Europeanization’ which erased the dominance of whiteness and denied the importance of race as an analytic category (Tomlinson, 2013a: 257). Bilge (2013: 411) refers to the same conference as an example of ‘the divergent priorities and sensibilities’ which emerge when intersectionality travels to Europe. She claims that (white) ‘European disciplinary feminism’ has ‘appropriated’ intersectionality, while the knowledge produced by ‘racialized Germans’ has been excluded and subjugated (p. 417). In order to make this argument, Bilge draws less on what happened at the conference (which she did not attend) than upon an earlier analysis by Erel et al. (2010) concerning the lack of attention paid to migrant and women of colour, in general, in German feminist academic debates.

Aside from the question whether the US reception of the Frankfurt conference does justice to the content of the presentations, not to mention the colour and ethnic background of the speakers and participants and the extent to which they felt excluded or silenced, the critiques have been themselves the subject of some contention. Jasbir Puar (2012), for example, well-known for her work in queer theory and critical race studies, has argued that the focus on the experiences of women of colour in intersectional analysis ends up producing women of colour as the Other who always must be displayed as resistant, subversive or articulating a grievance. While this ‘ironic othering’ was initially meant to establish a specifically Black feminist theoretical perspective, the result not only fails to do justice to lived intersectional subjectivities of women of colour, but it reifies this subjectivity in the ‘difference from white women’ (p. 52). In the same vein, Devon Carbado (2013), a US scholar of legal studies and critical race theory, argues that the strength of intersectionality lies precisely in its ability to offer a broad framework for analysing the multiplicities of all identities and configurations of power. As he puts it, it is a mistake to conceptualize intersectionality as a ‘race to the bottom’ (p. 814). Intersectionality should, instead, be seen as a map of social structure that can account for both the privileged and the oppressed, the margins and the centre. In principle, there is no reason why the white, heterosexual male should not be an appropriate subject for intersectional analysis. ‘Framing intersectionality as only about women of color gives masculinity, whiteness, and maleness an intersectional pass’ (Carbado, 2013: 841).

These disagreements within intersectionality studies suggest that a focus on the experiences of Black women does not automatically ensure that an intersectional analysis will be critical. Nor does a case for analysing which differences make a difference in terms of power, how they make a difference, and which actions toward social change are possible in a specific context mean that the salience of race in general has been denied. Yet the
concern about the displacement of Black women as the undisputed subjects of intersectionality and race as its the central axis mask a more general concern – namely, that intersectionality as a theory has been wrested from the hands of those authorized to speak in its name.

**Whose theory is it?**

The third bone of contention is whether intersectionality should be viewed as a Black feminist theory. Some have argued that intersectionality is Black feminist theory *par excellence* to the extent that any feminist of colour who fails to use it tends to be viewed as a ‘race traitor’ (Puar, 2012). Others extend the remit of intersectional theorizing to ‘African, Asian, and other diasporas in Europe’ (Lewis, 2013: 873) or to feminist theorists from the ‘Global South’ (Dhawan and Varela, 2016; Salem, 2018). However, this is where the ball should stop.

Critics of the reception of intersectionality have argued that it has been misleadingly treated as the ‘brainchild of feminism’ rather than as an anti-racist intervention by Black feminist scholars (Bilge, 2013). Given the long-standing failure within gender studies to address the experiences of women of colour, this is clearly problematic. As an example, Bilge (2013) criticizes the Scandinavian feminist Nina Lykke (2011) for claiming that many of the ideas now associated with intersectionality were already ‘in the air’ when Crenshaw wrote her famous articles and that the concept intersectionality became a kind of node for many different directions of critical (feminist) thought. According to Bilge, this implies that there is nothing specifically ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’ about intersectionality, with the result that intersectional theory has been ‘whitened’ and US Black feminist thought devalued as ‘just another perspective’ (2013: 414).

Tomlinson (2013a, 2017) attributes the appropriation of intersectionality from US feminists of colour as a particularly European act performed by ‘white, European managerial feminists’ intent on ‘colonizing’ intersectionality studies. Her rhetoric vividly evokes visions of US property being conquered and subordinated to the greater enrichment of European colonial powers. The ‘European narrative’ of intersectionality is, in her view, just one more instance of the ‘superiority of white European thinking’ over the ‘parochial thinking of Black American feminism’ as well as a reflection of the ubiquitous denial of race and racism in Europe (Tomlinson, 2018: 147). Tomlinson erroneously seems to assume that all European intersectionality scholars are white and operating according to managerial (diversity?) agendas.

Surprisingly, Tomlinson makes no reference to her own racialized position as a white woman who, wittingly or not, is invariably complicit in the histories of racism and imperialism of her own country. She neither acknowledges how her own location as a tenured academic in a neoliberal university might shape the way she frames her arguments, nor questions the tendency toward centrism and exceptionalism that famously plagues the work of even the most well-intentioned US scholars. Rather she unreflexively situates herself, along with other ‘true’ US intersectionality scholars, as gatekeepers in need of protecting ‘their’ (whose?) theory from ‘unauthorized’ interlopers (Tomlinson, 2018: 161).

Not all US scholars see intersectionality as needing to be returned to US Black feminism where it belongs. An interesting rejoinder to Tomlinson has been provided by Nash...
in her recent book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019). As we have already seen, Nash is critical of originalism. She does not want to protect intersectionality from its critics and, indeed, sees critique as a good rather than a bad thing. At the same time, she regards the travels of intersectionality, both within and outside the US, as a symptom of the fraught relationship between gender studies and Black feminism. While she understands the defensiveness of Black feminist scholars and their desire to hold onto intersectionality as *their* theory, she does not believe that intersectionality should be equated with Black feminist theory. Taking a different tack, she argues that Black feminism itself needs to be broadened. It should not be the exclusive territory of Black feminists, nor should Black women be trapped into always having to embody and perform their own intellectual projects. Instead, Nash suggests that Black feminist theory and scholarship should be given more attention within critical enquiry, which is a much more ambitious project than trying to protect intersectional thinking as the exclusive terrain of Black feminism.

Taken together, these bones of contention illustrate what is at stake in the US–European discussions about intersectionality. Race is, without a doubt, the pain point in the transatlantic intersectionality debates. Critics worry that if ‘race’ is no longer the central axis of intersectional analysis, intersectionality will lose its critical edge (Erel et al., 2010). Or if women of colour are not the privileged subjects of intersectionality, their experiences will, once again, fall between the cracks of feminist research. And, finally, if feminists of colour are not the producers and users of intersectional theory, their knowledge production will continue to be silenced and devalued within gender studies (Lewis, 2013).

Race and the existence (and denial) of racism are serious issues, in both the US and Europe. However, while there has been a long tradition of anti-racist discourse in the US, race has been treated with some ambivalence in Europe. Many scholars have rightly noted that Europe has often been silent about its own racial history as well as the current realities of racism in Europe. Moreover, Europe often situates itself as tolerant and democratic despite the rise of white nationalist extremism and the persistent forms of everyday racism everywhere in Europe today. It is, therefore, both timely and necessary that European feminists have been called upon to focus on race and racism explicitly in their scholarship as well as their activism (kennedy-macfoy and Lewis, 2014).

But is it up to intersectionality as theory to put race and racism on the agenda? Is intersectionality theory the only or even the best way to do this? Is intersectionality the sinecure for doing ‘good’, i.e. anti-racist feminist research or, as Carbin and Edenheim (2013) have argued, do we also need other theories (poststructuralist, postcolonial, anti-foundationalist) to help us do the job?

While understanding how race has become a pain point within the transatlantic debates about intersectionality can help explain why some scholars might feel that intersectionality needs to be saved and returned to where it belongs, it does not address the question about what this rescue act would actually entail. What would it mean for a theory to belong to a specific person, subject, or area of critical enquiry? And what would be required to ensure that the theory remained where it belonged and protected from unauthorized interventions? To this end, we might think about some of the ramifications of treating theories as property.
Theories as property

In a legal sense, one could argue that the intellectual ownership of a concept or theory or theoretical perspective belongs to the person who coined it. Most academics believe in citing the work of those whose ideas they use. The debates around intersectionality have been less concerned with whether Crenshaw as coiner of the concept has been correctly cited (she always is) than with whether subsequent readings have remained true or faithful to what she meant with her texts. The concern here is that Crenshaw’s intention should remain intact whenever her concept intersectionality is used. Thus, while Crenshaw is not regarded as the owner of intersectionality in a legalistic sense, she (and those who have read her correctly) are granted the right to control and sanction the kinds of interpretations that can legitimately be made of it.

In her pivotal book *Who Owns Academic Work?* (2011), the US legal scholar Corynne McSherry investigates disputes about the ownership of ideas and academic writing. In her view, there is always a property story involved in which knowledge is regarded as something that can be owned by an individual and needs to be protected from those who would (illegally) usurp this right to ownership. Once the freedom to use or disseminate knowledge is conflated with property rights (ownership), the object of knowledge becomes removed from the public domain, thereby ending the possibility of scientific enquiry as we know it.

The notion of textual ‘faithfulness’ which has been mobilized in the intersectionality wars implies a parroting of the original that would leave its meanings undisturbed. Imagine, however, the utter boredom that would ensue if scholars had limited themselves to loyally recycling the same insights over and over again for the three long decades following the appearance of Crenshaw’s texts on intersectionality. I have argued that one of the reasons for intersectionality’s success was not because it was the best theory for understanding the intersections between gender, race and other structural inequalities of power (Davis, 2008a). Rather it was precisely its incompleteness, open-endedness, and even contradictoriness that inspired scholars and even invited them to rework and elaborate it. These features allowed intersectionality to be taken up and adapted in different disciplines, within different theoretical schools, and as helpmeet for different methodological frameworks. They also accounted for its appeal to a wide audience. Intersectionality was not only a concept theorists could get their teeth into, but run-of-the-mill researchers could use intersectionality as a method or a coat rack to hang their ideas on. Activists could mobilize under its banner in the interests of a more inclusive politics. And policy makers could find ways to institutionalize it in order to diversify organizations and jurisprudence.

Of course, there has never been a guarantee that intersectionality would be reworked or put to uses that were to everyone’s liking. As we have seen, many of the ways it was taken up were considered problematic, depoliticizing, and even counterproductive. It is precisely for these reasons that intersectionality has been and continues to be the subject of critique, debate and elaboration.

In recent years, feminist scholars in the field of translation studies have tackled this tricky issue of how texts are taken up or – as the feminist linguist Luise von Flotow (1991) puts it – even ‘hijacked’. While the critics discussed above have expressed concern about
the dangers of ‘appropriating’ intersectionality, translation scholars have argued that ‘faithless appropriation’ is a feminist strategy par excellence (Tsing, 1997). In fact, the very willingness to uproot, displace and transform are integral to any feminist enquiry. According to Bracke et al. (2018), ‘the process of destabilising one’s own cultural norms, and the words within which they are couched, and the imagining of other ones, form part of feminist experiences of self-transformation, and of wider sociocultural transformation’ (p. 217; see also De Lima Costa and Alvarez, 2014).

In a similar vein, the feminist philosopher Sneja Gunew (2002: 42) has argued that ‘cannibalism’ – her metaphor for the process of incorporating the work of another into one’s own work – might even be a way out of the paralysing battles around identity politics in which members of the women’s studies community turn upon and silence one another in ever narrowing circles. She has expressed concern about the endless discussions within gender studies about whose authority should be counted and whose voice has been heard, who are the ‘appropriate’ victims and which systems of oppression are the most important (all issues that have been prominent in the intersectionality debates). In Gunew’s view, such discussions have become problematic because the traditional categories used in critical analysis (gender, race, class, etc.) increasingly come to function in universalized and un-nuanced ways. This prevents the cross-cultural and internationally sensitive collaborations that are essential to the vibrant future of gender studies in a world where theories travel.

Clearly, issues of ownership arise when theories travel and for this reason I now turn to the postcolonial scholar Edward Said’s (1983) pivotal work on travelling theory to help us think about the concerns which have emerged with regard to intersectionality’s transatlantic travels.

**Travelling theory**

For Said, the borrowing of theoretical ideas is an inevitable product of the forces of globalization. This borrowing does not occur on an even playing field and, therefore, requires constant critical vigilance. The movement of ideas forces us to reconsider the theory itself – its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems – and what can it suggest to us about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other’ (Said, 1983: 230). Said recognized that theory was always a response to a specific social and historical situation and that what could induce ‘insurrectional consciousness in one instance’ might become a ‘tragic vision’ in another (p. 237). In other words, travel did not guarantee that a theory would remain critical or subversive. In some cases, theories, upon gaining wider acceptance, become a ‘dogmatic reduction of the original version’ or are appropriated by institutions or schools to shore up their authority (p. 239).

Despite these reservations, Said’s vision of travelling theory was optimistic. This was not because he thought that theories necessarily retained their initial critical intent, but rather because they forced us to realize that we cannot predict how any given theory will be used in different historical and social contexts, let alone who its users will be. It is precisely the encounter of any theory with resistance, and, therefore, the possibility of critique, that enabled it to be critical in the first place. When all is said and done, he
asked, what is critical consciousness but ‘an unstoppable predilection for alternatives’? (p. 247).9

The tragedy of the recent transatlantic debates about intersectionality is not that there have been critiques of the way it has been used or who has used it and whether its subject or provenance is desirable or not. Critical discussions about the institutional and geopolitical context in which intersectionality is (or is not) taken up, both within and outside Europe, as well as the different ways it is deployed are both necessary and desirable. What is tragic, in my view, however, is the call to return to the original, to save it from some of its critics, and to prevent its travelling by keeping it firmly at home where it belongs. This is a model of theorizing that is not only a mission impossible; it is devastating to any kind of critical enquiry, including feminism and gender studies.

It is my contention that the last thing intersectionality studies need are saviours and gatekeepers. As critical enquiry, intersectionality demands an openness to a wide range of voices and perspectives. Intersectional scholars, wherever they are located, should at all times be prepared not only to criticize the ways intersectionality is taken up and used, but also to question their own basis for authority as well as their own terminologies and methodologies. Proprietary notions that intersectionality belongs to one author or to a particular school of thought or a specific geographic location should be abandoned in favour of understanding and thinking critically about how theories travel and in doing so take on different meanings and are used for different purposes. As a travelling theory par excellence, intersectionality demands that we all think transnationally and find ways to have heated and critical debates in which we are respectful of our differences and find ways to learn from them.

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Notes
1. The by no means exhaustive list would include: Alexander-Floyd (2012), Bilge (2013), Erel et al. (2010), Lewis (2009, 2013), May (2014), Nash (2008, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019), Salem (2018) and Tomlinson (2013a, 2013b, 2018) as well as the contributors to a special issue of Signs (Cho et al., 2013).
2. The monolithic use of the term ‘European’ in the ‘intersectionality wars’ is problematic for several reasons. The term ‘European’ does not address the myriad national differences in discussions about intersectionality and its reception, nor the often complicated belongings of individual intersectional scholars working in and around Europe. While these differences are interesting and important, it is not the purpose of this article to elaborate the varieties of European intersectional scholarship, but rather to question the ways the term ‘European’ has been used to disparage studies that have critically elaborated Crenshaw’s initial formulation.

3. The ways that intersectionality has been co-opted by universities, both in the US and Europe, in the interests of managing diversity has been insightfully addressed by Ahmed (2012).

4. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduces the concept of ‘intersectionality’ to address the gaps in both feminist and anti-racist discourse regarding the experiences of women of colour with discrimination in the workforce and with domestic abuse.

5. See, for example, the famous manifesto by the Combahee River Collective written in 1977 (see also Hull et al., 1982).

6. For an overview of some of intersectionality debates in Europe, particularly in the UK, Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands, see Davis (2008b). Since then, debates have flourished in other parts of Europe as well. Recent examples include special issues devoted to intersectionality in Italy: *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* (Italian Review of Sociology) (Columbo and Rebughini, 2016) and the Czech Republic *Gender A Výzkum* (Gender and Research) (Křížková and Hašková, 2018), both in English and available online.

7. While I do not doubt that intersectional theory would be taken up differently, whether this is automatically more ‘critical’ is an empirical question which would need to be investigated. As of yet, intersectionality seems to be more popular in the Global North than in the Global South, although this may, in part, be a result of a politics of translation which privileges texts written in English. An interesting exception is India where intersectionality has been drawn upon to understand the workings of gender and caste (Dey and Orton, 2016) and has been increasingly taken up as a banner for feminist activism.

8. In a recent intersectionality event in the Netherlands, Crenshaw remarked that this was something European feminists could learn from their US ‘sisters’.

9. Said (2000) elaborated his notion of critical theory, later suggesting that it was not just a matter of getting beyond ‘indignations of orthodoxy’ or ‘expressions of advocacy’, but that we need to look more closely at the travels that theories take – where they go, how they got there, and when a ‘fiery core was reignited’ and how (p. 452). What better formulation of a critical agenda for gender studies?

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