



Reclaiming Our Time: Asserting the Logic of Intersectionality in Media Studies

Jalia L. Joseph and Asha S. Winfield

Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

In our Gender and Black Freedom Movements graduate seminar, seven people sat around a conference-style table. At the front of the room, the professor prepared for lecture and class discussion, while two Black and five white graduate students, in between their first and second years, made light conversation. On this day, class discussion centered on the gendered dynamics of the Black Panther Party; we read Ashley D. Farmer's (2017) *Remaking Black Power*. In the first chapter of Farmer's book is a three-by-five-inch mixed-media image created by artist Gayle Dickinson from the July 1972 *Black Panther* newspaper. As Farmer (2017) describes,

The woman, dressed in hair rollers, a collared shirt, an apron, and no shoes, stares directly at the viewer, one hand on her hip; the other supports a bag of groceries from the Panthers' free food program. The woman also prominently displays her button in support of Panther leader Bobby Seale's mayoral campaign. The caption above contextualizes the woman's politics and party support: "Yes, I am against the war in Vietnam, I'm for African Liberation, voter registration and the people's survival!" (p. 1)

Following the traditional format of the class, the professor asked, "When you see this image, what do you see?" Instantly, our white peers painted this mammy-esque depiction of Dickinson's work, removing all notions of the "Black Revolutionary woman" (Farmer, 2017, p. 3). They saw her bag of groceries, her weight, her bare Black feet, and they immediately claimed that the image was negative; that there was no space for Black women to see themselves reflected in the artwork. Influenced heavily by their whiteness and sparse background in Black women's narratives, our peers could see only one layer of her existence. However, as the two Black students in that group, we saw our relatives, our realities, the women who raised us. We saw a Black woman who looked like freedom—not negative or stereotypical, but a woman who carried a familiarity. As Black graduate students, we were to embrace the physical image on the page to make space for Dickinson's embodied discourse, intellectually and historically.

This brief commentary reflects the draining realities of these conversations on us as Black graduate students. In response, we felt the need to write a paper as to why true intersectionality is essential to challenging the white logic that manifest in academia, scholarship, and critical media studies. In this article, we expand on the intellectual labor that is expected of Black scholars to effectively teach "race kindergarten"¹ while also attempting to do critical race and gender work. Specifically, we demonstrate that while some scholars aim to use intersectionality in their work, many stop at only the

basics, which allows for the regurgitation, repetition, and reification of power imbalances in critical media studies.

To do so, we first address issues of citational ubiquity regarding scholarship on intersectionality in critical media studies and communication. Then, using Black feminist autoethnography, we expand on the idea of race kindergarten using personal narratives and experiences within our graduate seminar to show the exhaustion we experience (Griffin, 2012). Finally, we end with a discussion about the possibilities of what it can mean to create work that embodies the intellectual integrity of intersectionality as a critical social theory (Collins, 2019). Much like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) wrote in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” we encourage and push self-proclaimed white feminist scholars to challenge theoretical and methodological lenses and to move beyond the basics of intersectionality.

The problem with citational ubiquity

At this moment, intersectionality exists in many disciplines, allowing scholars to see individuals' complexities to better understand different social phenomena: identity formation, controlling images, and multiple oppressions. As intersectionality has merged into the everyday language of society, the root of what intersectionality is and has the potential to be has been lost on the way. Often heralded as one of the “most important contribution[s] that women's studies has made so far” (McCall, 2008, p. 1771), intersectionality has been reduced to a buzzword providing space for authors to nominally, carelessly, and facetiously claim intersectionality (Davis, 2008). We are in an era where intersectionality is falling prey to “misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation” (Bilge, 2013, p. 410). We agree with Davis, McCall, and Blige that the buzzwording of intersectionality has made it accessible and exploitable, and we push further to say that the intellectual labor of Black women has routinely been misused by (feminist) academics who do not truly engage with Black women's work.

A subdiscipline is not absolved from misusing intersectionality to understand Black women, and we see this injustice replicated through the use of controlling images. As developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2002) in *Black Feminist Thought*, controlling images refers to “images ... designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 69). The development of controlling images connects to slavery, reconstruction, and Jim Crow, as the storied images of Black people became the stereotypical and standard material found in various types of media. However, while her orientation in Black feminist theory creates ample space to further develop controlling images as dependent on historical, cultural, and political climate, controlling images, much like intersectionality, become a means of citational ubiquity rather than using Black women's intellectual contributions to better advance scholarship (Cooper, 2015; Wiegman, 2012).

In simple terms, people use the concept of controlling images as an intersectionality checkmark of completion rather than struggle with the systemic and structural worlds where these images exist. A diluted version of Black feminist thought helps maintain white normativity by removing Black feminism's orientation in “oppositional knowledge” (Collins, 2016). Normativity is constructed through white epistemological

worldviews and white logic. As Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) show, white logic is the way “white supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts” (p. 17). This normalizing of intersectionality is reduced to a retrogressive form of identity politics in which white logic recenters white supremacy to construct a limited utility of intersectional analysis.

As shown by our opening vignette, our classmates’ attempts to understand Black women in media were informed by their white feminist worldviews; Dickinson’s image became replicated and reinforced in their heads as mammy. While dangerous, such replications and reifications are not the most exhausting and harmful aspects of their interpretations. We, the only Black people in the room, were charged with the responsibility to correct and challenge our peers repeatedly, to in some way move them beyond the boundaries of whiteness. This is the reality of Wendy Leo Moore’s concept of race kindergarten. Much like an actual kindergarten teacher teaches children how to count, scholars of color are compartmentalized into these repeated conversations, both interpersonally and in our academic writing. Race kindergarten erases Black feminists and other critical media scholars who repeatedly demonstrate that more controlling images exist beyond the mammy, Jezebel, and sapphire for the Black woman. We are not suggesting these images are no longer functional as controlling images. Rather, we posit that we need more (and have more) frameworks that consistently incorporate and advance Black feminist thought beyond the critique of the mammy as a controlling image.

Doing intersectionality

Media scholars who do race work have the power to bring to light the centuries of silence against Black women’s narratives. Intersectionality provides a methodological tool kit that is already enriched with the subjective experiences that connect directly to the social world. That tool kit not only includes space to expand what controlling images can be but also to construct a new lens for more representative analysis. Intersectionality’s utility in challenging the white capitalist state offers a space where Black women can be heard as well as centered (Collins, 2016). In an entertainment climate that (attempts to) capture the experiences of silenced Black women, critical media studies have considerable power: They can focus on the voices of Black women.

As graduate students and emerging scholars, we recognize that this work is just the beginning of our own “labor of love” (Collins, 2016, p. 143). Our opening narrative was not the first (nor will it be the last) occasion where we ask our peers and counterparts to actually see Black women. This article is not an attack on those who position themselves to learn more about Black women in classrooms or those who aim to incorporate Black feminist thought into their ways of knowing. Rather, it amplifies a greater systemic issue that erases Black women’s narratives both in and outside of academia—this is to say, to understand intersectionality as a theory of anti-racism that uplifts the voices and experiences of Black women. As scholars who claim to use intersectional analysis, we must orient ourselves in the embodied discourse of Black women. One cannot just “do” intersectional work; it is an injustice to the Black women who have spent their entire lives creating intersectional scholarship. Intersectional work is a conscious

commitment to Black feminists' and womanists' as well as women of color's right to exist. It is a call to understand intersectionality from outside the context of white logic and to position Black women as more than capable beings to understand their own structural locations.

We must include Black women's voices in critical media studies as well as understand and cite their scholarship. If we say we are committed to using intersectionality as a critical social theory in our work, we must also be committed to the intellectual brilliance created by Black women and to undoing the harm of creating work that silences their voices and narratives. We are suggesting that Black women are a bursting force in media, and it is necessary to examine these depictions through a different epistemological foundation that honors intersectionality as an extension of the mind, body, spirit, and soul.

Note

1. Credited fully to Dr. Wendy Leo Moore, a phenomenal critical race legal scholar at Texas A&M University. Throughout numerous classes and personal conversations, she uses race kindergarten to teach and emphasizes the consistent forms of emotional labor and repetitive means by which Black scholars are expected to educate white people on race and racism. Without her direction in critically advising graduate students, the theoretical framework of this forum paper would not have been possible.

References

- Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 405–424. doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000283
- Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2016). Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 5(3), 133–144. doi:10.1525/dcqr.2016.5.3.133
- Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cooper, B. C. (2015). Love no limit: Towards a Black feminist future (in theory). *The Black Scholar*, 45(4), 7–21. doi:10.1080/00064246.2015.1080912
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139.
- Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 67–85. doi:10.1177/1464700108086364
- Farmer, A. D. (2017). *Remaking Black power: How Black women transformed an era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Griffin, R. A. (2012). I AM an angry Black woman: Black feminist autoethnography, voice, and resistance. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 35(2), 138–157. doi:10.1080/07491409.2012.724524
- McCall, L. (2008). The complexity of intersectionality. In E. Grabham, D. Cooper, J. Krishnadas, & D. Herman (Eds.), *Intersectionality and beyond: Law, power, and the politics of location* (pp. 65–92). Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge-Cavendish.
- Wiegman, R. (2012). *Object lessons*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.) (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Copyright of Women's Studies in Communication is the property of Organization for Research on Women & Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.