

# Intersectionality as a Solution to Combat the Polarization in the United States

Madeline Pesce  
Department of Languages and Literatures  
University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina, 28806

Faculty Advisor: Maria Cebria

## Abstract

The United States in the 21st century is experiencing a great divide that could potentially tear the fabric of our government and challenge our humanity. This document seeks to further define intersectionality in contemporary contexts, given that intersectionality now faces battles in the fields of globalization, new civil rights movements and an unprecedented change in the government of the United States. To solve this problem, we can return to intersectionality within the individual; having diversity within oneself helps to better understand the personal circumstances of other people. When we help open the doors to the "other" and start listening to other voices, Americans could begin to repair the division and take responsibility for those marginalized by the government of the United States.

## 1. Body of Paper

Often, we seem to have difficulty relating to "the other" because we do not recognize the complexity of human experience, and the complexity of our individual identities. Intersectionality is a term that was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the experience of black women as two identities that intersect in a single identity, and not operating on two separate platforms. This is the case of people of any race or ethnicity, and this concept can help us explain how race and gender are not mutually exclusive categories. I want to examine the way humans look at the "other" as a foreign being and how we can look for diversity within ourselves. I will talk about how intersectionality can work in our politics and how a restructuring of the concept of identity is necessary to reform the government of the United States and thus include everyone. I propose intersectionality as a way to combat the proliferating hatred that accumulates every day, and in this way, create a world that is more inclusive and altruistic. A large-scale change begins at the individual level. If the government of the United States speaks for the people, then the people have the responsibility to be self-conscious and inclusive with all people on a global scale.

The term "intersectionality" was coined by an American woman, Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 and discussed for the first time in relation to black women and perceived restrictions in the legal system in the United States. Sherrie Proctor defines intersectionality as the simultaneous experience of social categories such as race, gender, class, and nationality and highlights the ways in which social categories interact to create systems of privilege, power, discrimination, and oppression (Proctor, 359). The judicial system has taught us to understand identity as mutually exclusive categories, but the reality is that all people have several identities that intersect in various situations, depending on the social situation. To re-contextualize this concept within a contemporary vision, we must speak of intersectionality as an all-inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, and all identities that humanity can experience.

At this turn of the century, we face contemporary problems with new terminology; Globalization has penetrated the social structure of the world, affecting immigrants and how they perceive race and ethnicity. With the growth of globalization, nationalism has grown. The prejudice we carry towards the "other" has changed the way in which we identify the characteristics of intersectionality. In a report by Maylei Blackwell and Nadine Naber on the World

Conference against Racism of the United Nations, which the United States abandoned on the fifth day, Viola Casares of Fuerza Unida spoke of the connection between globalization and racism, stating that:

"... women of color, poor women, those that don't have the right kind of education, those women stepped on, discriminated against, are oppressed as if they aren't worth anything. We know that globalization increases the violence that happens in our communities, especially domestic violence and violence against children in communities of color ..." (Maylei, Naber, 240).

Here, we can see that globalization exacerbates the conditions under which marginalized groups function in society. In the same way that the concept of racism begins to spread on a global scale, a broader and collective vision of this terminology appears, changing the general definition in the face of the infinite contexts in which racism operates under colonialism, imperialism and nationalism as with "lattices" within local histories, cultural formations and power relations (Maylei, Naber, 240).

As the definition of racism becomes more general, the context begins to disappear. There cannot be just a single definition of terms like racism because it operates on many different levels around the world. For example, women suffer from gender discrimination, but in addition to this, they experience discrimination if they have a darker skin color, a lower caste, speak another language, a certain age, a different sexual orientation, and many other things that play a role in being a woman. Because of this, many women are pushed to the margins and experience a form of discrimination that is not recognized by the government. All of this accumulates to create the social position of a person, and this is intersectionality.

Given this foundation, we can use intersectionality to navigate and analyze the structures of power in education, justice, and our political systems to include everyone instead of allowing citizens to contribute to oppression and privilege. Today, we see discussions about inclusivity, but we do not see those who suffer on the margins at the table. We see politicians and government officials fighting for the rights of victims of abuse and discrimination, but where are the voices of the victims? Why do victims still have no voice, even when the discussion is about protecting them and their rights? Why do these people still not find justice in our judicial system? Is it not the foundation of America that all people are created equal and that everyone receives adequate and well-deserved justice when necessary? These rights that are supposed to be intrinsic to our human worth are publicly abused by the United States government as if human rights were a joke, causing the wound to be opened again and again: a normalized hobby for the subtle verbal abuse that ostracized groups experience daily. Maybe today it will be when someone in the store demands that you speak English in this country, or when you are afraid to walk to your car at night after work, or when you are the only person in a discussion about racism that is not white and your opinion is ignored. It is very common for public abusers to have power over their victims and win in a court of law. It is time that the voices of the victims are worth more than the ambiguous discourse of the white men in power who speak with the carelessness of a child, who devastate the vulnerable, who bleed out everyone in their path, leaving silenced corpses behind without a single tear to cry. This is the world in which we live today as a human family: a world in which one does not care about their neighbor. It is one that killed the American Dream before it existed.

When we look at the higher education system, we can see some examples of this. Sherrie Proctor, in an essay examining microaggressions indicated that, "Latino students report higher frequencies of racial microaggressions in relation to others who assume they have lower intelligence, but Latino students also report higher frequencies of racial microaggressions characterized by others seeing them as exotic or verbalizing ethnic stereotypes about them" (Proctor, 357). This type of verbal abuse exists among marginalized groups as well. The same study said that Latino students attending a historically black university reported experiencing open and hostile micro-insults from black peers, including being teased because of their ethnic origin, uncomfortable glances, and hearing hostile comments about their presence on campus. (Proctor, 357)

Present in our world is the globalization of the dominant culture in all of our literature, media, and entertainment. In mainstream media, there is a sense of apathy; Every day we see people being killed and we experience a kind of desensitization to these problems dealing with corruption and violence. Nowadays, it is normal to see people being killed by the police, almost encouraging the same in the spectators, promoting more corruption while everyone continues to pay no attention. This slow progression allows the system of power and corruption to continue and exacerbate until it is too late for the people of this country to notice. This has happened with many dictatorships throughout history, and it is happening here, on this earth now, and still no one has noticed.

We can see evidence of this in our mainstream media; there is a rich diversity in the United States, but what is popular in actuality is not portrayed or considered "popular." All people interact with the media, even if they do not realize it; the media affects us and can strongly influence our behavior. Especially in children, whose lives are now incredibly dependent on television and tablets, much of our growth depends on technology. Due to this strong influence, people of all identities must be represented in these social media platforms to change what people perceive as "normal" in our society.

Another problem in recognizing diversity is the apathy many people feel about politics because "it does not affect them." With the proliferation of media, we have the ability to separate our real selves from our social media selves. We can escape from reality with the media, and escape from the media with reality. We have the option to turn off our televisions, phones, and tablets when we do not want to see the news and choose the type of news we want to hear. This separation allows us to create a bubble around the media and what happens in the world, leaving us without an emotional connection with what is happening around us. Thus, the personal world and the political world operate in two different axes in which the participants have the option to take part. In addition to the privilege that many Americans experience at various levels, some people can completely separate themselves from the political world because it does not really affect them. We have lost our sense of human empathy with the practice of isolation through the media.

Intersectionality shares a lot with the platform of contemporary feminism. Mara Viveros Vigoya argues that the intersectional paradigm is "the extension of the feminist principle ('the personal is political') by addressing not only its implications of sex, but also of race and class ..." (Viveros Vigoya, 4). This contrasts the separation between politics and the personal, and recognizes people who have the social privilege of being able to separate the two. For those people that society directly and negatively impacts, the personal and the political is almost inseparable. According to the philosopher Elsa in the Viveros Vigoya work, "the theories of intersectionality have moved between two approaches to domination: an analytic and a phenomenological. From the first perspective, all domination is, by definition, a domination of class, sex and race, and in this sense is itself intersectional, since gender cannot be coherently dissociated from race and class. For the second perspective, what is intersectional is the experience of domination" (Viveros Vigoya, 7-8). Because the potential scope of domination can change, it seems more realistic to define the intersectionality within the changing forms of domination in social systems, which falls within the latter definition. Domination is intersectional and our remedies should be as well. We can see the adaptation of gender in certain race groups, as in how "... gender relations are used to reinforce the social relations of race, like when indigenous men are feminized or black men are hypermasculinized... these relationships are built in a reciprocal way" (Viveros Vigoya, 8). These people cannot define their gender without race and vice versa; society forces us to fit into one box at a time, ignoring the intersectional human that fits into multiple boxes. In this investigation of feminism, we cannot ignore the perspective of men and the place they occupy in feminism.

In the same way, a mixture between a privileged identity intersected with one that is oppressed creates a complicated situation. Discussions about feminism center around white women who contribute to the platform, sometimes silencing women of different races. Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about the invisibility of black women, a condition perpetuated by white feminists. She argues that, in cases of discrimination based on race and sex, the priority is with the most privileged members, and adding black women to this existing structure will not solve the problem of oppression. The specific case to which Crenshaw is referring is the case of General Motors in which the company simply did not hire black women before 1964 and all black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs in a dismissal based on seniority during the subsequent recession. The district court granted a summary judgment for the defendant, rejecting the plaintiffs' attempt to file a lawsuit not on behalf of the blacks or women, but specifically on behalf of the black women. The court declared:

"The plaintiffs have failed to cite any decisions which have stated that Black women are a special class to be protected from discrimination. The Court's own research has failed to disclose such a decision. The plaintiffs are clearly entitled to a remedy if they have been discriminated against. However, they should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies to create a new "super-remedy" which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended. Thus, this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both" (Crenshaw, 141).

By not allowing the plaintiffs to argue both identities, they allowed for easier manipulation of the system to reinforce oppression. For example, if the plaintiffs argued instead for discrimination against women, they could argue that women have always had a place in the company. If they had to defend discrimination against blacks in the company, then they could respond with the post-slavery mandate that regulated the hiring of blacks. But to argue both is to introduce a new problem that they simply are not allowed to counter by judicial means. If there is not enough evidence or research to support a claim of discrimination, others have no tool to fight.

For white women, says Crenshaw, there is no need to clarify discrimination as white females because there is no discrimination against being white. Almost the entire feminist platform evolves from a white racial context because feminists ignore how their own race works to mitigate some aspects of sexism and the frequency with which it privileges and contributes to the domination of other women. Crenshaw says, "It's ironic that those who are concerned

with alleviating the evils of racism and sexism should adopt a top-down approach to discrimination. On the other hand, if their efforts began to address the needs and problems of the most disadvantaged, restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, others who are particularly disadvantaged would also benefit" (Crenshaw, 167).

When considering native feminist theory, we see that the concerns and priorities of white women, women of color, and indigenous women are varied and even contrast one another because the goals of each are intersectional within the feminist framework (Arvin, 10). For example, as indigenous women face colonialism, women of color in the United States face racism that founded the very birth of their country, while white women face the overarching heteropatriarchal social structure that penetrates society in every corner of the world. These circumstances all affect how each woman processes and prioritizes the collective goals within feminism.

It is clear how invisible societal structure has made women, and especially women of color when we look at the popular Mexican-American activist, Dolores Huerta, who has been swallowed into the shadows of her husband, Cesar Chavez. Her contributions have changed how feminism has functioned in America, but still she is not well known by most people. In his publication, "Dolores Huerta: Woman, Organizer, and Symbol", Garcia notes that "while tomes have been written on Cesar Chavez, almost nothing has been written about Huerta...she carried the aura of Cesar Chavez" (Garcia, 57). Huerta was even criticized for her "neglect" of her children, and her "aggressive, almost manlike, role in the union" (Garcia, 59). She did not obsessively prioritize the traditional female virtues of being gentle, motherly, and submissive, triggering a response of fear and anger in both men and women who are, due to a hegemonic social structure, made uncomfortable by her more direct and aggressive attributes.

Feminist theory pays attention to what happens to white women. Anti-racist politics pay attention to what happens to the black middle class or black men. It seems that the entire platform of civil rights is based on the fact that everyone cares about themselves and their own interests, ignoring the others with whom they align. To fight for your own symptoms in a marginalized group that you identify with while failing to recognize that others belonging to your group are being silenced makes your claim for civil rights less valid because it is done in vain. If you fight for the rights of a marginalized group, you fight for the entire group. We must exercise a more diverse and global citizenship: one that cares for all disadvantaged people, people with different levels of injustice, raising the voices of those below, as well as fighting against the growing injustice as a crucial part of our duty as citizens of the world.

I propose intersectionality, diversity within oneself, as a solution to reduce the discrimination that is fostered in traditional views and in the isolation of the United States. Instead of seeing oneself as one thing, it would benefit the individual and the group to see ourselves as a diverse unit. Instead of trying to fit into molds and classify people as "the other," we should try to relate to ourselves first and allow space for change and diversity within ourselves. When there is diversity within us, it will be easier to relate to diverse people. Rebecca Hwang in her TED talk, *The Power of Diversity within Yourself* speaks about her own diverse identity and how it can benefit everyone:

"I stopped looking for a perfect match with the people I knew. Instead, I realized that often I was the only match between groups of people who were usually in conflict with each other... I decided to accept all of the different versions of myself, even allow myself to sometimes reinvent myself... now, today, my identity search is no longer to find my tribe. It is more a matter of allowing myself to accept all the possible variants of myself and of cultivating the diversity within me and not only around me."

Now, I ask everyone to use their platform of privilege to give others a voice that have been silenced by our social structure. Share with them your tools to defend themselves. Use your privilege to help others and not just to help yourself. Recognize your own intersectionality and acknowledge it in others.

## 2. Bibliography

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, 2009, [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/up-next?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/up-next?language=en).

Arvin, Maile, et al. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8–34. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43860665](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860665).

Blackwell, Maylei, and Nadine Naber. "Intersectionality in an Era of Globalization: The Implications of the UN World Conference against Racism for Transnational Feminist Practices—A Conference Report." *Meridians*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, pp. 237–248. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40338519](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338519).

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics ." The Feminist Press, 1982.

Garcia, Richard A. "Dolores Huerta: Woman, Organizer, and Symbol." *California History*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1993, pp. 56–71. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25177326](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25177326).

Hwang, Rebecca. *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, TED, [www.ted.com/talks/rebecca\\_hwang\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_diversity\\_within\\_yourself?language=es](http://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_hwang_the_power_of_diversity_within_yourself?language=es)

Proctor, Sherrie L., et al. "Examining Racial Microaggressions, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Bilingual Status with School Psychology Students: The Role of Intersectionality." *Contemporary School Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 355-368. *ProQuest*, <http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/docview/2108768004?accountid=8388>, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s40688-017-0156-8>.

Symington, Alison. "Interseccionalidad: Una Herramienta Para La Justicia De Género y La Justicia Económica." AWID, 9 Aug. 2004.

Viveros Vigoya, Mara. "La Interseccionalidad: Una Aproximación Situada a La Dominación." *Debate Feminista*, 19 Oct. 2016, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0188947816300603](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0188947816300603).