

Teaching Feminist Philosophy on Race and Gender: Beyond the Additive Approach?¹

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Abstract:

This paper addresses a dilemma in feminist philosophy: how do we engage effectively with historical texts that marginalize the subaltern other? Feminist standpoint theory and critical race theory have popularized an *interlocking systems of oppression* approach which raises serious questions about the durability of feminist and anti-racist epistemic practices loyal to an “additive” approach (King, 1995 [1988]; Spelman, 1988). I argue that the interlocking approach does make our epistemic practices more robustly truth-seeking; however, it seems to undermine the “ampersand” or additive approach that feminist philosophers have used to ferret out discriminatory evaluations in canonical andropocentric texts and in the contemporary life-world. My question is whether we can continue to teach and investigate race and gender as if they were isolated facts of life or whether we can appropriate a combination of additive and intersectional analysis, which engender a meaningful practice of solidarity.

In their textbook *Theorizing Feminisms*, editors Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (2006) ask the following self-reflective study question: “Does thinking about intersectionality reveal weaknesses in Haslanger’s discussion of the social construction of gender, Wendell’s discussion of the social construction of disability, or Young’s discussion of oppression?” (p.40). I would like to offer an affirmative answer and at the same time point to the difficulty of articulating a rich account of intersectionality of systems of domination in particular when teaching courses on prejudice and discrimination.

I find it troubling that it remains a major challenge for me to teach the interlocking approach to undergraduates in the US context. Perhaps part of the problem is that our textbooks and methodology are overly loyal to the additive distinctions that Deborah King (1995 [1988]) and Elizabeth Spelman (1988) have argued against over twenty years ago. We simply lack the models that show a different approach. However, two philosophers, who wished to overcome this divide, are Carole Pateman (1988) and Charles Mills (1997). Their seminal texts on the Sexual and Racial Contract respectively, provided a singular focus and critique on implicit and explicit gender/race bias in the social contract tradition. By authoring a joint book (2007) on these biases and on global dimensions of the racial-sexual contract Pateman and Mills provided an important philosophical model for an interlocking analysis. Mills, in particular, validates the perspectives of women of color feminists in his pertinent essay “Intersecting Contracts” (2007), since they had historically, philosophically, and legally no privileged access to the racial-sexual contract, and he endorses Crenshaw’s analysis that they had in fact been rendered ontologically invisible or suspect (p. 198). Being written out of

¹ I am grateful to Seth N. Asumah, Ann Ferguson, and Sally Haslanger for insightful comments and discussion of previous drafts of this paper.

history and philosophy strengthened Black women's resolve to "talk back" (bell hooks, 1999) and to lay claims to an intersectional analysis of oppression (p. 191). In her paper "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be," Sally Haslanger (2000) argues that an analysis of gender and race categories should be guided by four concerns "in the fight against injustice": (1) identify persistent inequalities and explain how they are socially constructed; (2) identify the effects of interlocking oppression, following Crenshaw (1993); (3) understand that disciplines themselves such as philosophy, religion, science, and law "might be 'gendered' and/or 'racialized';" and (4) take into account the agency of those who are oppressed so that they can be empowered as critical social agents (Haslanger, p. 36). I would go further to add (5) a need to decolonize philosophy, giving voice and listening to those—and assigning their writings in our classes—who have been marginalized and silenced in "the canon." Furthermore, rather than "empowering" oppressed people, I would hold with Foucault that power comes from below, and does not need to seek authorization by those who are in privileged positions.

US feminist theory has moved far by first staking out claims in terms of dual systems theory (gender and class oppression as co-foundational), then tri-systems theory (gender, race, and class) to a more nuanced discussion of intersectionality approach of trying to understand how multiple forms of oppression crisscross and sustain privilege as well as discrimination. Textbooks such as James Sterba's *Social and Political Philosophy* (2003) specifically endorse "feminist and multicultural perspectives" (cf. the subtitle), but when looking closely they discuss classical Western texts almost exclusively under the guise of "women as opposed to people of color," which is the typical guise of white solipsism—whiteness being located in a privileged epistemic position and in fact being central to theorizing about inequalities (cf. Spelman, 1988, pp. 116-120). Even though the juxtaposition of Hobbes's *Leviathan* with diaries from Las Casas describing Spanish imperialism is imaginative and presents students tools for ideological critique vis-à-vis social contract theory, it is incapable of transcending the "ampersand problem" of "women and ..." (cf. Spelman, *ibid.*). Sterba's text then reinscribes the ampersand problem in the following way: there are feminist texts and there are multicultural texts, but it cannot be the case that there are feminist texts that are multicultural and vice versa. Clearly, the dialogue with the Western tradition is still lodged within a white context that simply has too few analytical tools for addressing the ontological positionality of non-binary identities such as "women of color," mixed race people, gender non-conform or trans people. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has shown a way of thoughtfully analyzing classical texts and highlighting the ampersand problem, but it seems that her analysis does not make it into philosophical diversity education and the textbooks of the new millennium. There are exceptions, though. Contrasting her position with Marilyn Frye's additive analysis, Sally Haslanger rightly argues that "there are contexts in which being Black *and male* marks one as a target for certain forms of systematic violence (e.g., by the police). In those contexts, contrary to Frye's suggestion, *being male* is not something that a Black man 'has going for him'" (Haslanger, 2000, p. 41). In a way, using Foucault's phrase of the homosexual having become a new species, the same can be said of African American men under the state's surveillance:

Once blackness and crime, especially drug crime, became conflated in the public consciousness, the “criminalblackman,” as termed by legal scholar Kathryn Russell [1988], would inevitably become the primary target of law enforcement. Some discrimination would be conscious and deliberate, as many honestly and consciously would believe that black men deserve extra scrutiny and harsher treatment. Much racial bias, though, would operate unconsciously and automatically—even among law enforcement officials genuinely committed to equal treatment under the law (Alexander, 2010, pp. 104-5).

Similarly, although not as well theorized by white feminist philosophers, one could argue that Black women qua raced group face implicit bias that goes beyond a gender cum race construction of social identity. Many Black women writers reveal that they find themselves raced first in a white supremacist society and specifically, vis-à-vis the Prison Industrial Complex: Black women are dramatically overincarcerated in comparison to white women due to the selective enforcement of the War on Drugs (a ratio of six to one; cf. Barry, 2010). While they may have avoided the negative tag of the “criminalblackwoman,” Black women, and in particular Black lesbian women, have written about the exclusionary practices they experience in history and feminist politics as if they have been treated to a new species being—namely, being treated to many “controlling images” of stereotypes² that are rooted in U.S. chattel slavery (Hill Collins, 1990; Davis, 1981; Hull et al., 1982; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Combahee River Collective, 1977/83; cf. also Riggs, 1987).

Yet, there are occasions where an additive analysis seems to have salience. Linda, a student of mine in a historically white Midwestern US university, did a thought experiment prior to our discussion of the additive analysis. She visited the student union for leisure time activity and wanted to play futsal with a number of students, all of them passing (at least to her) as white men. They refused her offer to play with them. She walked away trying to sort out reasons for this rude refusal. A little later, she went back to see if anybody else had joined them. Sure enough, she spotted an Asian male student who participated. Linda is from Peru and has darker skin color than most students on campus. When she identified the new play situation, she realized it was because of her (perceived) gender, not because of her (perceived) race that prompted the exclusion. Perhaps I should have followed up her important contribution to our class discussion with a reading of Iris Marion Young’s classic text “Throwing like a Girl” (1990). Her text along with the much anthologized essay “Oppression” by Marilyn Frye (1983) are two of the salient philosophical texts in diversity education which still have great pedagogical value introducing the concept of sexist discrimination in isolation from other categories such as race and class. Of course, Frye’s text performs a modicum of intersectionality by addressing gender and sexual expression of girls.³ Frye’s examples reflect feminist critiques of the cult of true womanhood, which is an ideal

² The mammy, the jezebel, the welfare queen, the matriarch are some of the enduring racial-sexual stereotypes targeting African American women (cf. Collins, 1990; Riggs, 1987).

³ I am sympathetic to Suzanne Pharr’s perspective, expressed in the title of her book *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988). She argues that gender policing always already is interwoven with sexual policing.

propped up for the benefit of white middle class US women, yet, interestingly, I find great resonance with her analysis in the diverse classrooms I have taught in US and German academic institutions that have drawn students from across the globe. So there is something about patriarchal ideology that women of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, class, and sexual orientation can relate to.

“Doing” Intersectionality

Feminist sociologists such as West and Zimmerman (1987) have pioneered the study of “doing gender”, which has recently found new exploration in the “doing gender diversity” (Plante and Maurer 2009). Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Angela Y. Davis have shown the way of an “undoing” of the additive analysis. Their approach has been described as “intracategorical intersectionality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773) because they tend to focus on neglected identities and social groups (p. 1774) and acknowledge diversity of experiences within these marginalized groups (p. 1782).⁴

In her influential pedagogy text *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) writes about influences that have resonated with her politics of location as well as informed her search for truth:

[With respect to] the discussion of feminism and sexism, I want to say that I felt myself included in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the first Freire books I read, in a way that I never felt myself—in my experience as a rural black person—included in the first feminist books I read, works like *The Feminine Mystique* and *Born Female*. In the United States we do not talk enough about the way that class shapes our perspective on reality. Since so many of the early feminist books really reflected a certain type of white bourgeois sensibility, this work did not touch many black women deeply; not because we did not recognize the common experiences women shared, but because those commonalities were mediated by profound differences in our realities created by the politics of race and class (hooks, 1994, 51-52)

It is the case that an additive approach to race, class, gender furnishes us with an analytic tools of understanding these distinct categories. However, they don't overdetermine the politics of location. As hooks's reflection points out, the additive analysis gives us very little insight on the reading predilection of a young woman's epistemic standpoint. Why could the text of a white Brazilian man (who admitted to sexist bias in his works) have more intellectual appeal and contribute to the psycho-social and political formation of a young Black Southern, rural woman than homegrown texts of white women such as Betty Friedan and Carole Bird, which led to consciousness-raising of an entire generation of women and no less, to the second wave of feminism in the US? Clearly, it is not enough to “blame” bell hooks for “false consciousness” when she finds Freirian liberatory education more life-affirming and resonating with her more profoundly than white liberal middle class revaluation of US society in the 1960s and 70s. I imagine that Afro-German women who met with

⁴ McCall differentiates the intracategorical complexity from anti-categorical (i.e. postmodern or poststructuralist positions) and inter-categorical complexities, the latter using categories in a strategic sense to “document relationships of inequality among social groups” (p. 1773).

Audre Lorde in the late 1980s and were inspired to write internationally acclaimed books (cf. Oguntoye et al., 2007) on their politics of location found themselves relating much better to the Afrocentric feminism of a Caribbean woman than to the radical feminism of a white German such as Alice Schwarzer.

Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) famously critiques the additive approach in the following way:

Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent they can forward the interests of “people of color” and “women,” respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other. The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. (p. 1252).

Not surprisingly, if the blind spots of additive theory are such as Crenshaw diagnoses, it follows that “women of color” drop out of the analysis altogether as the oft cited poetic book title: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) makes obvious.

Spelman's particularity theory has been critiqued as throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Performing an ideological suspicion of any kind of generalizing about women as a group has the effect of dismissing any serious interest in studying what is common to women (Mikkola, 2008). I would argue that rather than overgeneralizing womanhood, we need to draw on approaches that sensitively describe women's realities that do not lend to the ignorant position that Friedan's work in particular suffers from. Standpoint theory, especially as conceived by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, seems to me a salient response to Mari Mikkola's objection to Spelman's theory. McCall (2005) agrees by suggesting that intracategorical approaches towards intersectionality use categories to make generalized claims while avoiding “homogenizing generalizations” (p. 1783).

Hill Collins outlines the promises and pitfalls of an intersectionality theory in a particular nuanced way. Her approach resonates with Linda Martín Alcoff's theory of positionality, which avoids sweeping generalizations, white solipsism, and at the same time a bucolic retreat into reactionary individualism. As Alcoff puts it, “being a ‘woman’ is to take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context. From the perspective of that fairly determinate though fluid and mutable position, women can themselves articulate a set of interests and ground a feminist politics” (1997, p. 150). Alcoff thus argues for a politics of identity, where identities serve as a point of departure but never become reified or static.

Hill Collins (1998), too, wishes to reject liberal individualism arguing that it is crucial to differentiate between individualized and group oriented intersectionality analysis. Frankly, it is easier to treat race, class, gender analysis to an interlocking review comparing individuals such as a white woman and a Black woman rather than “muddying the waters” with a group-based contextual analysis of multiple identities. In fact, much of classroom discussions and student essay

writing takes on the familiar individualized narrative and Hill Collins holds that “valorization of individualism to the point where group and structural analyses remain relegated to the background has close ties to American liberalism” (p. 207). However any gain for collective bargaining rights, civil rights for African Americans, or reproductive rights for women have come out of a collective struggle, rather than won by individual state actors. Students who don’t understand the “borning struggle” of the Civil Rights Movement adhere to the logic of race, class, gender becoming “defined as personal attributes of individuals that they should be able to choose or reject. Thus, because it fails to challenge the assumptions of individualism, intersectionality when applied to the individual level can coexist quite nicely with both traditional liberalism and a seemingly apolitical postmodernism” (ibid.). What is particularly troubling to her as academic is that intersectionality leaves many peers a bit smug about claiming a piece of the oppression pie or salad. They will advocate a theory of “equivalent oppression” suggesting that all are somehow oppressed, which obscures power relations and hierarchical deployment of racial, gender-specific, and class-based forms of discrimination (p. 211).

In addition to the individualistic and group-based analysis differentiation, Hill Collins also offers insights on the valuation of the race, class, and gender axis of interpretation. For Black women living in the US, “racism overshadows sexism and other forms of group-based oppression” whereas white women “have difficulty seeing themselves as already part of Whites as a group” (p. 208). She postulates that comparing women across racial lines is fraught with special difficulties. Race-class categories are inextricably intertwined for Black women, which is echoed by bell hooks in the quote above, in large part thanks to the history and legacy of slavery in the US and its concomitant legal containment of African Americans (p. 209). Arguably, the passage of the 13th Amendment to the US constitution, which abolished chattel slavery at the same time that it codified state-sponsored slavery within the prison system (cf. Nagel, 2008; and James, 2005), buttressed the intersecting relationship of race and class. “Race operates as such an overriding feature of African-American experience in the United States that it not only overshadows economic class relations for Blacks but obscures the significance of economic class within the United States in general” (Hill Collins, p. 209).⁵

Drawing on Marxist feminist standpoint theory, she notes that the race-class axis of oppression is best seen in practices of segregation (housing, education, jobs) and surveillance (p. 210)—presumably Hill Collins refers here to the intense criminalization of Blacks, outpacing even apartheid policing in South Africa. Standpoint theory is useful because “group location in hierarchical power relations produces shared challenges for individuals in those groups. These common challenges can foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint that in turn can influence the group’s political action. Stated differently, group standpoints are situated in unjust power relations, reflect those power relations, and help shape them” (p. 201). Obviously Black women are also concerned

⁵ It is unclear to me how McCall’s own intercategory approach can adequately address racialized class politics (or racialized gender identities for that matter), because McCall insists on treating race and class as distinct, quantifiable categories for her own research on structural inequality.

about the gender axis of oppression but it is harder to assess with the solidarity ideal that standpoint theory invokes than the race-class axis, because women do not live apart from male family members but live within racialized communities and as such “women remain disadvantaged in seeing their connections with other similarly situated women” (p. 221).

Since Hill Collins hits an impasse explaining the intersections of race and gender, we may turn to Iris Marion Young’s classic essay of “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective” (1994). Young usefully distinguishes between women who qua women are associated as if they were in a series, and those self-actualized, politicized women who are group-based and share goals and objectives. Her series conceptualization echoes Hill Collins’s perspective, since it takes account that women are not bonding in a “beloved community” but may in fact have very little in common across race, national borders, sexual orientation, etc. “Membership in the series does not define one’s identity... The series is a blurry, shifting unity, an amorphous collective” (Young 1994, p. 728). Women seem to constitute a series in the way that commuters waiting in line for a bus have a common purpose in getting on the bus, securing a seat and getting to their destination using a particular means of transport. They leave their passive stance towards the practico-inert realities, i.e. the life-world they are thrown into, and become self-conscious group members, when they collectively—as a group—rally for better transport schedules, lower prices, safe location of bus stops, thus pursuing a common goal by petitioning city hall. It is ironic that Young should select a bus commuter example, because it is so clearly marked by racial-class segregated realities; very few white women use the bus system in US cities. Young notes further that

as a series *woman* is the name of a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history. But the series *women* is not as simple and one-dimensional as bus riders or radio listeners. Gender, like class, is a vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping set of structures and objects. Women are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by the activities surrounding those structures and objects (ibid.)

Building on Young’s women as series conceptualization and on her later work in social responsibility, Ann Ferguson (2010) argues that one way out of identity-based projects is to rally for solidarity networks; presumably, she has in mind Young’s group-based model that is self-conscious about its aims and objectives. Ferguson finds that such “solidarity practices are becoming an achieved social base through a developing global network of alternative economic, political, and social practices that oppose neoliberal capitalist globalization and other global injustices” (p. 185). Solidarity gestures and collective action arising out of an emotional or a sex-affective (Ferguson, 1989) concern and commitment to social justice may give us a way out of the impasse lamented by Hill Collins.⁶

⁶ However, teaching US undergraduates about solidarity practices is not without problems. I have found that students’ first response often is either a moral or cultural relativism defense (“people should pursue whatever suits their moral compass”) or a “death by culture” (cf. Narayan, 1997) moral outrage argument (“women in those cultures need to be rescued by us, i.e. the West”). In the latter move, students adopt the “speaking for others” stance that has been problematized by Linda Martín Alcoff, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak,

Concluding I would argue that it is not appropriate to discard the additive analysis altogether, but when focusing on an interlocking systems of oppression it is important to keep in mind the interlocking and solidarity perspectives of bell hooks, Hill Collins, Young, Martín Alcoff, and Ferguson, if feminist theory continues to have salience as critical social theory and not drift into an idealized theory of justice as fairness as advocated by John Rawls. Furthermore, taking my cue from the classic Black feminist studies book title (Hull et al., 1982), we need philosophy readers which do not engage in implicit bias by labeling all Indians as male and all women qua mothers as white or Anglo when critiquing Locke's contract theory. Interrogating *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (Zack et al., 1998) and "adding" an intersectionality section at the end of the textbook perhaps is similar to the prevalence of 1980s readers and syllabi that focused on (white) feminist theory and then "stirred in" texts on subaltern subjects at the end of the book and course. Fair enough, several of the articles in Zack's book reflect an interlocking systems of oppression analysis such as bell hooks's article "Talking Sex" in the section on sexuality; however, I am hopeful that we will find a better way to make intersectionality of race, gender, and other categorizations a *central* concern of our analysis in order to "decolonize philosophy."⁷ Let me be clear that I do not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater: helping undergraduate students understand key categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, etc., is important to help them getting a richer sense of the world around them; however, if it is done at the exclusion of understanding how these categories intersect with each other, it may lead to an "oppression olympics" that Audre Lorde (1984) warned against, i.e. that some forms of exclusionary or supremacist categorizations are more oppressive than others. Alternatively, students may argue for a relativist moral stance, namely, that "if all find themselves in an oppressive force field, then all of us (or, none of us) are oppressed," a position, which opens the door to the non-sensical "reverse racism." This phrase is an invention of U.S. right wing discourse which was meant to attack affirmative action policies. Inevitably, discussions around race and gender lead to "difficult dialogues" between students and teachers and enrich our sense of being in the world and contributing to one that is free from hierarchical, exclusionary thinking. A utopian goal, indeed, but one that is worth striving for.

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and others. My worry is that if we engage with their texts which interrogate Eurocentrism, cultural imperialism, etc., that students then withdraw to the other extreme, namely of moral relativism, rather than engage in a nuanced solidarity approach of "listening to and learning from" those who face the devastating effects of neoliberalism.

⁷ I am indebted to Linda Martin Alcoff for this term, which she introduced during a discussion at the "Engaging Philosophy" conference at Mt Holyoke College, March 26, 2011. Also cf. a suggestive book interrogating philosophy in this way: *Fanon and the Decolonization of Philosophy* (Hoppe, et al., 2010).

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