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Feminism and Intersectionality: Black Feminist Studies and the Perspectives of Jennifer C. Nash

By Goutam Karmakar¹

Abstract

This in-depth conversation with Jennifer Christine Nash, the Jean Fox O’Barr Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University, USA, aims to illuminate the complexities of intersectionality in feminist discourse. This interview focuses on Nash’s work and perspectives on intersectionality in relation to gender, class, race, sexuality, and hierarchies of power and privilege. This interview discusses precarity, vulnerability, and intersectionality in black feminist discourse, as well as the marginalisation of black women’s heterogeneity, the politics of reading associated with intersectionality, and the relationship between temporality and intersectionality. Additionally, this conversation discusses Nash’s monograph, *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), post-intersectionality theory, the relationship between intersectionality and transnationalism, and intersectionality in feminist futuristic discourse.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Intersectionality, Gender, Postfeminism, Race

Introduction

Intersectionality, a concept proposed in the United States by black feminist scholars, activists, and thinkers, examines the experiences of women who are impacted by the privileges and limitations associated with other social groups to which they belong. By challenging the homogenous idea that all women's experiences are identical, intersectionality highlights the significance of systemic structural inequalities and power dynamics stemming from different identities and orientations, such as gender, race, and class, which overlap and have a cumulative effect on women's issues and experiences. Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, emphasises the “multidimensionality” of oppressed people's lived experiences and recognises how various types of oppression frequently coexist and intensify one another (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Since its inception, intersectionality has been preoccupied with a single convergence: the intersection of race and gender. For that purpose, intersectionality rejects the “single-axis approach” frequently espoused by feminist and anti-racist scholars, and focuses on “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s experiences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Intersectionality is advocated as a theoretical and methodological solution to what is undoubtedly “the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism—the long and painful legacy of its exclusions” (Davis, 2008, p. 70).

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Being “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall, 2005, p.1771), intersectionality, with its emphasis on multiple and many-layered ways of oppression, serves as a point of intervention for black feminist scholar, activist, and thinker Jennifer Christine Nash who is now working as the Jean Fox O’Barr Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University, USA. Nash earned her PhD in African American Studies at Harvard University and her JD at Harvard Law School. She is the author of three books: *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (2014) (awarded the Alan Bray Memorial Book Prize by the GL/Q Caucus of the Modern Language Association), *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019) (awarded the Gloria Anzaldúa Book Prize by the National Women’s Studies Association), and *Birthing Black Mothers* (2021). She is also the editor of *Gender: Love* (Macmillan, 2016). Her research has been supported by the ACLS/Burkhardt Fellowship, Radcliffe Institute, and the Woodrow Wilson Junior Faculty Career Enhancement Fellowship. Her research interests include black feminist theory, intersectionality, black sexual politics, black motherhood and black maternal health, birth work, race and law, and feminist legal theory among others.

For Nash, “intersectionality, the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). While Crenshaw asserts that she can hardly identify the notion due to its meaning being twisted or altered as a result of careless or thoughtless readings (Crenshaw in Guidroz and Berger, 2009, p. 65), her worries have been addressed in various ways by Nash. Nash is engaged with what she refers to as a protective disposition, a “defensiveness” based on assertions of genuine and truthful exposure to and commitment to the fundamental vision and objectives of intersectionality. The distortion of intersectionality and the pressing need to reinstate it to its original state (Davis, 2020, p. 114) become the centre of discussion and critical intervention in Nash’s book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. My reading of this thoughtful and intriguing monograph on “intersectionality wars”, a term coined and discussed by Nash in this book, led me to read more of Nash’s academic writings on intersectionality and black feminism, and subsequently to seek her out for this interview. The interview itself is a culmination of our exchange of views and observations on intersectionality and black feminism through emails over a sustained period. As with our other conversations, this interview has also been conducted using email as the best medium to express our perspectives and ideas about the directions for future research on intersectionality given the geographical and time differences between us. One of the significant themes in our exchange pertains to white feminism, and Nash’s analysis of the way the term has been cast and understood in popular discourse. As Nash observes, “white feminism”, has served as a substitute for the persistent biases both of white academics and white women’s public displays of racism, collapsing the two with important scholarship by white feminist thinkers. The effects of this flattening of complex positionalities has maligned significant contributions by white feminists, thereby potentially precluding the possibility of coalitions across differences. In this context, the following interview offers insights into Nash’s understanding of intersectionality, and the ways in which feminists researchers can work together collectively and collaboratively.

Text of the interview

Goutam Karmakar (GK): In feminist discourse, intersectionality has emerged as a dominant method of comprehending the relationship between oppressive systems that shape our numerous identities and social positions within the hierarchies of power and privilege. Taking

into consideration that “women’s lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304), I would like to know your perspectives on intersectionality in feminist theory?

Jennifer C. Nash (JCN): I understand intersectionality as a theory, method, practice, and politics emerging from black feminist theory that is primarily concerned with the experiences of the multiply-marginalized, particularly black women. While there are different genealogies of intersectionality (through scholars including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Combahee River Collective, and Anna Julia Cooper), and black feminists regularly debate who “started,” “coined,” or invented intersectionality, there is a collective sense that the term performs work on behalf of the multiply-marginalized, theorising their experiences, identities, and collective capacity to see how structures of domination operate. Indeed, I think one aspect of intersectionality theory that is often under-theorized is its interaction with standpoint theory, or with Collins’ conception of the “outsider-within.” Certainly, Crenshaw’s work invites us to consider how multiply-marginalized subjects have a distinct and particularly accurate view of how power operates, of the “foot that is on our neck,” to riff on Catharine MacKinnon’s provocation.

Of course, my own work has been focused on the circulation of intersectionality in the US academy, and increasingly in US political life, as a synonym for diversity, equity, inclusion, and often for “black women” ourselves. I am very interested in how the term is invoked – often on the US Left to describe an ethically virtuous perspective, and on the US Right to describe a dangerous world view that is often connected to the university (in other words, there is an increasing sense among conservatives that intersectionality is one of a number of “dangerous” ideologies, like critical race theory, that vulnerable undergraduates encounter in the university).

GK: How would you like to establish a link between precarity, vulnerability, and intersectionality in black feminist discourse?

JCN: I see intersectionality—particularly a vision of it that is attached to the juridical (again, this is through Crenshaw’s work)—as being interested in how a form of legal doctrine designed to protect black women from their vulnerability to discrimination actually continues to leave black women unprotected. Crenshaw emphasises that this is *by design*. Law’s preoccupation with understanding harm as either race-based or gender-based necessarily blinds it to the forms of injury and violence that black women so often experience. When black women offer claims of harm that differ from white women’s gender-based claims or black men’s race-based claims, US antidiscrimination law so often refuses to see black women’s injuries.

My own work is also interested in vulnerability as something that cannot be remedied or redressed. I am interested in subjectivity and embodiment as marked by vulnerability. To have a body is to be vulnerable, to aging, to sickness, even as those vulnerabilities are differently distributed based on race, gender, nation, class, and sexuality. And to be in community with others is always to be vulnerable to harm. I don’t actually think relationality can be stripped of harm or injury (and I’m not sure I want that world). I see relationality as rife with possibility because we open ourselves up and risk ourselves, *knowing* that we can get hurt, and that we might hurt others.

GK: Concentrating more on race and gender than on sexuality and class in the context of a black woman’s specific figure has several detrimental effects. As you argue, it “neglects the heterogeneity of ‘black woman’ as a category” and equates black feminism entirely with this intersection, therefore precluding “explorations of other intersections to a range of related activist-intellectual projects” (Nash, 2011a, p. 456). What do you mean to say by this negligence of the heterogeneity of black women as a category?

JCN: One of the ways black feminism has been institutionalised in women’s studies—at least in the US—is through the fixity of black women as figures. It is still the case that there is far too little attention paid to the variety of experiences (and thus political needs, desires, and

wishes) of black women, which gets flattened even more through calls to “cite black women,” “listen to black women,” “vote like a black women,” “let black women lead,” etc., as if black women are a monolith who will always advance the same perspective. What might happen, I wonder, if we didn't presume to know what black women think, want, or know?

GK: While assessing scholarly books and articles on intersectionality and feminist studies, you have certainly talked about “intersectional originalism” (Nash, 2016, p. 4) and the importance of ‘inaugural’ intersectional texts by Crenshaw. While rescue work is important to safeguard intersectionality and re-establish it with its inherent vitality and boldness, needless arguments surrounding originalism and the dishonest interpretations of intersectionality have thwarted Crenshaw's intentions and aspirations. What are your thoughts on this politics of reading?

JCN: I think there's a politics of reading that often obscures that reading is actually always interpretation. My interest in originalism is in how black feminists found—or find—themselves arguing that the Truth of intersectionality is located in the text. This is a perspective that argues that if we're only more faithful to the Word, to the Gospel according to Crenshaw (or Collins, or Combahee), we can unleash intersectionality's true analytic power.

My own interest is in a black feminist conception of reading that recognises that we are always putting texts to work in different ways in distinct historical, social, and political contexts – and that the vitality and durability of a text is actually its capacity to explore and explain differing historical moments and conditions. Think about the texts you return to again and again, at different moments in your intellectual life. Those texts have power because they can be deployed to offer insights into so many different contexts. This, I think, is part of the enduring power of Crenshaw's work: intersectionality can be used to explain and analyse the workings of power in so many different contexts and moments.

GK: In your opinion, as a form of “affective politics” (Nash, 2011b, p. 3), black feminist love-politics stresses transcending the self and generating new kinds of political communities. How would you like to describe the ways in which affective politics transcends identity politics, and the institutionalisation of intersectionality?

JCN: In that article (published in *Meridians*), I wanted to think about black feminism as one of the few radical traditions that has centred love. I am writing this a few weeks after bell hooks' (too early) death, and I am reminded of her crucially important work on love. I am also, of course, reminded of Audre Lorde and June Jordan, both of whom asked us (to borrow Jordan) where is the love, what happens when we engage in theoretical and political work animated by love: for self, for others, for the earth, for spirit. I think of Alice Walker's call for “absolute trust in the goodness of the earth,” and M. Jacqui Alexander's plea that black feminists contend with the sacred.

This is a vision of feminist work—theory and politics—that is animated by intimacy, vulnerability, and interconnection. It has valued intuition, feeling, embodied forms of knowledge, memory and postmemory, and the importance of contending with ghosts (thinking of Avery Gordon), ancestors, and the ongoing presence of the dead in the lives of the living.

I didn't think then—and I don't think now—that identity politics needs to be transcended, or that identity is a dirty word. However, I do think that a rigorous consideration of black feminist work on love helps us remember the multiple preoccupations black feminist theory and practise have had. The reduction of black feminism to intersectionality has allowed us to forget that black feminists have long had interests and preoccupations aside from describing interlocking structures of domination.

GK: For you, intersectionality as a feminist disposition across time functions as a compelling hermeneutic that responds to both what women's studies could have been and what it has already become, to the discipline's objectives and development. In this context, can you describe the relationship between the progression of intersectionality toward an unavoidable

future (what you refer to as *feminism-future*) and its location in an “already-transcended past (what you refer to as *feminism-past*)” (Nash, 2014, p. 46)?

JCN: The article that pre-dated my book was interested in the relationship between temporality and intersectionality (this was in *Social Text*). I wanted to think about how it felt (to me, at least) that black women were always cast as outside of the present—as either historical figures or as embodying a future we might one day achieve. What does it mean to be an anachronism? How does that feel? And why does US Women’s Studies require this positioning of black women’s bodies?

In the context of intersectionality, I wanted to think about how the analytic was (and still is) either positioned as a source of fatigue (here I’m thinking with Tiffany Lethabo King’s work), something we already did, dangerously tethered to identity politics and to black women’s imagined demand for an account of ourselves. Or it is hailed as something we might one day achieve, a utopia where feminism has resolved its problems and has reached the level of desired complexity.

GK: In your monograph, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019), you have termed post-intersectionality theory as a discipline that “has generated new analytics—including multidimensionality and symbiosis—as a way of honouring the political investments of intersectionality while attending to intersections ‘beyond’ race/gender” (Nash, 2019, p. 66). Therefore, can you explain how post-intersectionality theory has worked to modify and redefine intersectionality through a variety of questions, analytical methods, and arguments?

JCN: There are various kinds of “post-intersectional” thinking emerging from differing disciplinary traditions and political orientations. The post-intersectionality scholars I cite in the book are mainly working in the US legal academy and are trying to think about axes of discrimination and harm that intersectionality theory (and US law) have neglected, particularly class, but also sexuality and disability. I think their work is not just about adding more vectors to intersectional analysis, but also thinking about how US law has theorised race and gender as particular forms of identity.

GK: Do you think that white feminism, as a term, refers not only to white women’s racist political performances, but also to their unwillingness to acknowledge the principles and practises of intersectionality theory, a conceptual framework engrained in black feminist theory (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 894)? Or are there other possible and positive ways to read white feminism?

JCN: In the US, white feminism is a term used to denigrate a set of bad actions and bad actors, often operating apart from feminism entirely, even when the term “feminism” is mobilised to describe and condemn them. It is used to describe white complicity with the state, white carceral longings, and white investments in private property. It also describes (and polices) Karens and Beckys, who wield a particularly feminised form of power.

I do think – as you suggest here – that white feminism has been cast in feminist theory and politics as intersectionality’s opposite, as a failure to heed the warnings and demands of intersectionality. Popular feminist texts (e.g. Kyla Schuller’s new book, Rafia Zakaria’s new book) now suggest that the remedy for white feminism is intersectionality, and that white women’s redemption can come only through a wholesale dedication to black women and black feminist politics.

I am pessimistic about the analytical and political work that is being forged through the term white feminism. I think the term problematically presumes black women’s heroism and white women’s villainousness. I think it purports to be a theory of power that reveals that white women are actually agents of antiblackness, but I think what falls out is a rigorous analysis of patriarchal power (black and white) that falls out of feminist analysis.

GK: You have perceived “intersectionality and transnationalism as anti-subordination analytics, frameworks, and politics that inform theory, politics, and feminist worldviews” (Falcón & Nash, 2015, p. 8). How would you like to facilitate intellectual coexistence between intersectionality and transnational feminism in this context?

JCN: Part of the way that I want to facilitate the coexistence of these terms is by treating them as both invested in theorising power and its workings and in theorising how marginalised folks get imagined, even by radical social movements. I see, for example, Chandra Mohanty’s work in “Under Western Eyes” as deeply aligned with Crenshaw’s investments. I see them both as offering a critical analysis of feminism’s strategic engagement with women of color, and insisting that we theorise power differently. I am also interested in genealogies of women of colour and feminist thought that consider Mohanty and Crenshaw as interlocutors, as scholars writing in the same period. The categories “black feminism” and “women of color feminism,” “intersectionality and “transnationalism” make those connections impossible to see.

GK: How would you like to connect dominant feminism and intersectionality in the ongoing effort to bridge critical disparities between black studies and women’s studies?

JCN: I’m not sure how much of an effort to bridge these disciplines there is. And that might be fine. I see black studies and gender studies as allied fields, but also marked by very different preoccupations (theoretically and politically). I think there might be something generative about the gaps between these traditions.

GK: How would you like to perceive intersectionality in post-feminist discourse?

JCN: I don’t believe in post-feminism. I’m sceptical of *posts* generally, but I can’t imagine feminism as something that we will ever be beyond (or as something that will ever be in our collective past).

GK: Do you think that the notion of intersectionality can play a major role in feminist science fiction and feminist futuristic settings?

JCN: I think the speculative is about world-making (and as Justin Mann brilliantly notes, world-breaking) and about radical acts of imagination. I think, as I hope I argue in my book, that intersectionality has myriad forms of theoretical and political power that we haven’t yet unlocked, that we are still understanding and dreaming. I think intersectionality—and black feminist thought more broadly—is central to feminism’s futuristic projects.

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