

## **Panel Discussion on “Theorizing Intersectionality and Assemblage”**

**Hosted by Women’s and Gender Studies Department**

**Date:** 16 August, 2013

**Venue:** School of Public Health, C1, University of the Western Cape.

**Time:** 1-3 p.m.

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Intersectionality a complex theoretical paradigm.

**Doing an intersectional analysis on the methodological premise that all identities intersect, but that each identity/subject position does not always ‘weigh’ the same.**

Nira Yuval-Davis talks about the importance of analysing “how specific positioning and (not necessarily corresponding) identities and political values are constructed and interrelate and affect each other in particular locations and contexts” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 200). She notes how particular positions are intermeshed and how “the specific social, political and economic processes involved in each historical instance is important” (2006: 200).

**Specificity and situated-ness** is significant here: My own research has shifted in how I employ intersectionality as a research tool. What’s become important is how research participants’ identify which subject positions are significant for them at a specific moment, in a particular space. So while my understanding of intersecting subjectivities shifts over time – for example, depending on the social, political and economic context in SA, I would value say class, space and race - participants’ narratives would highlight the positions that are important to them in a specific moment.

**The notion of excess and Other:** Theories of intersectionality, and its deployment, especially as conceptualized by Kimberle Crenshaw in the 90s in the United States, have been critiqued in recent years. Jasbir Puar, for example has discussed how the specific naming/addition/highlighting of ‘Woman of colour’, “produces an ironic reification of sexual difference as a/the foundational one that needs to be disrupted” – “sexual and gender difference” becomes the “constant from which there are variants.” This has centralised “the subject positioning of white women”(Puar, 2011, no page). Many white feminists, then, according to Puar, continue to take gender and sexual difference as foundational.

This idea of race positioning as excess has been discussed in useful ways by Audre Lorde, and I’ve found that going back to Lorde’s *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* written in the early 80s, has assisted me to place intersectionality into perspective. Lorde speaks about ‘surplus

people' – black people, women, working-class people, lesbians and gay men – and how the notion of difference has been used by institutions (and other spaces, of course) to place the responsibility of surplus people to educate unmarked people (whites, heterosexuals, middle-class) about our difference. Not useful, she says. These differences have been misnamed, misused, and to separate and confuse:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognise those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation (p. 115).

The current language in mainstream academic/research spaces appears to be diversity – we are all different, and we need to accept each other for our differences. In some ways, there appears to be a basis for this kind of thinking around diversity that we are all 'equal' – this is part of the neo-liberal lie that if you, as an individual, work very hard, you will 'make it' in the world. That these differences are imbued with power and subjugation, appears to be ignored/erased in the name of 'holding on to the past' in negative/non-constructive ways. Naming race difference, gender difference, and class difference, is important, for the possibilities this holds to re-name and redefine, not in terms of victimhood, but as a means to, as Pumla Gqola states, allow for "new, conflicting meanings".

Intersectionality, for me, is not only about our experiences as human beings – it's about recognising how power works broadly and specifically between human beings, but also how human beings with less and more power use power over Others. I am interested in how humans engage animal Others, and how we perpetuate colonial-style, patriarchal-style, privilege in these relationships. It's why I found Eusebius MacKaiser's recent book 'Bantu in my bathroom' so deeply troubling, in its liberalism, its arrogance, skewed arguments, and reification of white privilege. He (wrongly) identifies that it is our human-ness that makes us special, and superior to everything else – animal Others, etc, and that it is because we can identify with each other in terms of how we look and feel (what does this say about race, gender, and class?), we therefore need not worry too much about how we treat others who may look and feel differently. And his kind of liberalism (very popular in South Africa, and hence my concern that this book was published) allows for violence.

I find that talking about human-animal relationships within the prism of intersectionality is hard in South Africa. Making these connections are generally not welcomed in mainstream academia (it's not understood as part of the development agenda), and as a surplus person, my role should be dealing with surplus issues – race, gender, etc, which I do, because I have to, and because it makes sense to me. But an intersectional approach requires understanding a broad range of connections. I agree with Maneesha Decka when she says that:

As much as intersectionalists may wish to create a vision of human specialness that does not exclude other humans, this desire will remain frustrated because it rests on exclusions (of animals and other non-humans) that rely on hierarchies of race, culture, and gender for their logical sway (Deckha 2009, 265).

So let me say this, as a way to bring this all together: At a theoretical level, intersectionality makes sense. In my research, where I am engaging people and they are telling me their stories, they often identify the subject positions important to them in a specific moment, depending on the space they occupy. It's important that I listen to what they have to say about intersectionality, and to not map my own theoretical insights unproblematically onto their narratives. Secondly, some intersections matter to me more than others in specific moments, and specific spaces. Right now, because of the place we are at in South Africa and the kinds of neo-liberal discourses that are dominant, race and space matters to me more as a feminist, living in Africa. But what also matters to me is how these intersect with species discourses, the politics of human-other-animal relationships, and how this is a feminist question, which should be part of how we theorise intersectionalities, and how we imagine different ways of being in the world.