

JOHNNELLA E. BUTLER

# Intersectionality and

*In fact, in our age of media-produced attitudes, the ideological insistence of a culture drawing attention to itself as superior has given way to a culture whose canons and standards are invisible to the degree that they are “natural,” “objective,” and “real.”*—EDWARD SAID, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*

*I am speaking as a member of a certain democracy in a very complex country which insists on being very narrow-minded.*

*Simplicity is taken to be a great American virtue along with sincerity.*

—JAMES BALDWIN, *I Am Not Your Negro*

INTERSECTIONALITY—an integrated approach to analyzing the complex, matrix-like interconnections among patterns of discrimination

based on race, gender, and other social identities, with the goal of highlighting how resulting inequalities are experienced—has many implications for exploring the relationship between knowledge

and experience and for understanding identity and its role in scholarship and teaching. Over-archingly, it has the potential to reveal the power dynamics within the melting pot, whose hegemonic place in the American imagination has continually thwarted our achievement of a complex, pluralistic, relational national identity. Building such a national identity is necessary if we, as a country, are to realize the generative diversity that arises from the conflictual and complementary complexities of democracy.

In this short article, I explore the significance of intersectionality to a liberal education curriculum in both general education and the major, at two- and four-year colleges and universities, and its potential for undoing what I call the violent conundrum of our national identity. To paraphrase Edward Said, quoted in the epigraph above, that violent conundrum has become

“natural,” “objective,” and “real” in its insistence on a binary understanding of people, their identities, and their ideas as either superior or inferior.<sup>1</sup> By denying the contextual, interconnected, and relational dimensions of individual, group, and national identities, such an approach facilitates the dismissal of those identities as signifiers of essentialist identity politics, ultimately distorting the humanity of all. While not a panacea for binary thinking, intersectionality is a necessary framework for methodological and pedagogical engagement with complexity and conflict. It allows us to embrace diversity—in teaching, research, and scholarship; in student and faculty development, recruitment, and retention; and, ultimately, in our everyday political experiences as citizens.

To many, intersectionality is a troublesome term. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Ange-Marie Hancock, a scholar of the topic, is quoted as saying that the term “shape-shifts so much as to no longer be recognizable as anything other than a meme gone viral.”<sup>2</sup> As sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge discuss in their definitive work, *Intersectionality: Key Concepts*, it has been criticized for being separatist and fragmentary; for placing more value on cultural recognition and narrow interests than on economic redistribution and the social good; and for fostering victimhood. In their detailed, explanatory, and accessible study, Hill Collins and Bilge respond to these critiques by analyzing how simplistic, individualistic, and essentialist interpretations of identity politics infect our political discourse and obstruct much of our understanding of one another. “Collectively,” they demonstrate, “these arguments against intersectionality’s claims to identity only work within narrow understandings of intersectionality that simultaneously emphasize intersectionality as a form of abstract inquiry and neglect intersectionality as a form of critical praxis as it actually happens.”<sup>3</sup>

As the Baldwin epigraph above reminds us, we cannot solve the problems of our democracy with a narrow-minded simplicity—no matter how sincere.<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality, when applied broadly and critically, can be a pathway toward much-needed complexity in higher education inquiry and praxis.

JOHNNELLA E. BUTLER is professor of comparative women’s studies at Spelman College.



# Liberal Education



Spelman College



### Origins and uses of intersectionality

While intersectionality can provide a framework for integrated analysis of the interconnected realities of many social identities, it historically has involved particular attention to the central roles of race and gender. In a 2015 contribution to the *Washington Post* titled “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, the legal scholar whose 1989 article “put a name to the concept,” succinctly explains how a 1976 discrimination suit against General Motors prompted her, as a young law professor, to define the “profound invisibility [of black women] in relation to the law.” She explains:

Racial and gender discrimination overlapped not only in the workplace but in other arenas of life; equally significant, these burdens were almost completely absent from feminist and anti-racist advocacy. Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should—highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand.

Her delineation of the case demonstrates the complexity of how race and gender interact, and clarifies how considerations that rely on racism alone can obscure the function of gender discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

While Crenshaw’s work has proved foundational to our understanding of intersectionality, the concept’s origins can be traced back at least

as far as Sojourner Truth’s 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman” speech. In fact, scholars throughout the years have proposed similar approaches to analyzing race and gender, although often circumscribed

by the silos of their own disciplines or interdisciplinary fields. The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, for example, clearly signaled intersectionality:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1980s, feminist scholarship took what one might now call an intersectional approach, with a focus on expanding the “women” in women’s studies. For example, in their 1984 book *Women’s Place in the Academy: Transforming the Liberal Arts Curriculum*, Schuster and Van Dyne called readers to “pay meaningful attention to intersections of **race, class, and cultural differences within gender**” (bold in original);<sup>7</sup> similar calls appeared in Culley and Portuges’s 1985 volume *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*.<sup>8</sup>

If similar delineations of intersectionality predated Crenshaw’s foundational 1989 work, interest in the topic has only continued to grow in the decades since. In 1991, arguing for the potential of ethnic and women’s studies to transform the liberal arts curriculum, I recommended beginning any curricular change by teaching about the experiences of women of color, which reveal how race, class, ethnicity, and gender modulate one another: “The categories of race, class, ethnicity, and gender are unified; likewise their related ‘-isms’ and their correctives.”<sup>9</sup>

The fall 2011 volume of *New Directions for Institutional Research*, entitled “Using Mixed-Methods Approaches to Study Intersectionality in Higher Education,” provides examples of intersectional analysis applied to researching the faculty experience, college access and equity, racial “hyperprivilege,” student experiences, and mixed-race identity, among other topics.<sup>10</sup> More recently, in their 2013 fact sheet “Intersectionality in Sociology,” Jones, Misra, and McCurley identify intersectional sociology as occurring most frequently in journals focused on feminist, ethnic, and racial issues and those discussing social problems.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, intersectionality has come to serve as a key point of connection across disciplines. In literary studies, Ketu H. Katrak posits that “intersectionality precedes interdisciplinarity, the former method leading and informing the latter.” She states that the theoretical category of intersectionality

includes the analysis of a growing intersection of categories that are crucial in interpreting ethnic literary texts: the centrality of race and ethnicity as intersected and modulated by gender, sexuality, class, the state, and increasingly, by nationality, immigration laws, and diasporic concerns. I assert further that intersectionality, in terms of the deployment

**Intersectionality has come to serve as a key point of connection across disciplines**





Manchester  
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of the categories of race, gender, and class, along with nation and diaspora, informs the use of interdisciplinarity. In contemporary reading practices for literary texts, scholars rely primarily on intersecting categories of race, gender, class, and nation, among others. The intersecting categories then guide scholars in their use of other disciplines such as history or politics.<sup>12</sup>

As this small selection of examples illustrates, intersectionality has been deeply influential across a range of areas of scholarship. At the same time, I would argue, it still stands to be integrated more fully across the content and pedagogy of the undergraduate curriculum. What, then, can intersectionality contribute to liberal education, and what is its connection to the quest for equity and inclusive excellence?

### **Intersectionality's transformative potential**

In their recent volume, Hill Collins and Bilge define intersectionality as having become a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity of the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and

conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Hill Collins and Bilge go on to identify six "core ideas" of the intersectional framework: (1) social inequality, (2) power, (3) relationality, (4) social context, (5) complexity, and (6) social justice.<sup>14</sup>

These core ideas are consistent with the implicit aspiration in the word *veritas*, which appears so often on the institutional seals of our colleges and universities to signal our shared search for truth. These ideas also resonate with the challenge often rightfully posed to higher





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education: that our work should better the human condition, and that the liberal education we provide should grow our democracy by enhancing civic engagement among our graduates. Each of these core ideas is essential to the transformative work that intersectionality can bring to liberal education. But one idea in particular—*relationality*—holds special promise for the work of educating for democracy.

Why is relationality so important? In brief, it is important because holding concepts, identities, experiences, and

**The false boundaries of knowledge prevent us from recognizing, and even allow us to deny, how power functions**

knowledge in relation to one another requires a both/and thought process that enables one to identify and analyze complex connections. Relationality

allows for the interconnected interrogation of difference, identity, and power relations and the conflicts they entail. Furthermore, it challenges the idea that categories of difference, identity, and power exist in *binary opposition* to each other, when in fact the relationships among these categories involve varying *degrees of opposition* that result in complicated power dynamics and injustices. Relationality allows

us to comprehend the “matrix-like interactions” of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and other categories of identity, suggesting a nonhierarchical methodology that bursts open the oppressive order imposed by individual and institutional “-isms.”<sup>15</sup>

If relationality—or, in the context of undergraduate education, encouraging relational thinking in our curricular and cocurricular pedagogies and in our scholarship—is so critical to combating oppression in society, what are the implications for our approach to liberal learning? In short, relationality requires a pedagogy that encourages students to acquire knowledge of social context and power dynamics so they are able to recognize social inequalities and equipped to pursue social justice for all, a necessary requirement for our democracy to continue and flourish. As I have written elsewhere, such a pedagogy “would refuse primacy to either race, class, gender, or ethnicity, demanding instead a recognition of their matrix-like interactions.” Indeed, the interactions among these categories are as critical as the categories themselves; for, “speaking generally, the sexism that the black woman experiences, whether instigated by white or black males, is reinforced and defined in its nature by the



racism and ethnocentrism of the oppressors. Class, of course, creates additional variations.”<sup>16</sup>

There are challenges involved in implementing a pedagogy based on such a nonhierarchical methodology. Among these challenges is the possibility that such a methodology, in disrupting long-established approaches, “increases in whites the fear of displacement from the center, the locus of control,” even as it simultaneously “increases the fear of being relegated to the periphery” for people of color, “who are fighting for validation within the traditional norms.” In short, even after decades of theoretical development, implementing intersectional approaches continues to challenge the established order. To a degree, the words I wrote in 1989 remain true today: “All of us trained traditionally, even as we challenge, experience an uneasiness with interdisciplinary approaches as they defy the (false) boundaries of knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

The false boundaries of knowledge prevent us from recognizing—and even allow us to deny—how power functions. They allow us to ignore how racism forged the connection between rich and poor whites that Lillian Smith wrote about in the mid-twentieth-century South,<sup>18</sup> and to overlook, when debating whether Harriet Tubman should replace Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill, that Jackson’s Trail of Tears essentially led to the expansion of slavery and the forced takeover of Native lands.<sup>19</sup> They obscure these and other histories that informed the shouts of white nationalists in Charlottesville this summer: “We will not be replaced!” and “Jews will not replace us!” The boundary between class and social context obliterates the fact that the “working class” extends beyond white men and women, while simultaneously being modulated by race and gender.

While liberal education does not focus solely on issues of identity per se, the relationship between identity and power—sometimes called the politics of identity or identity politics—arguably shape what is taught and to whom; whose histories are told and not told; who is defined as object and not subject. This is true of literature and the arts, but it is also true of the social sciences and STEM disciplines. In our work to transform liberal education so that it meets our students’ changing intellectual and skill-based needs, we are implementing new programmatic structures that may well be transformative. However, if these structures lack relationality and complexity—two defining dimensions of

intersectionality—their transformative potential will be severely limited.

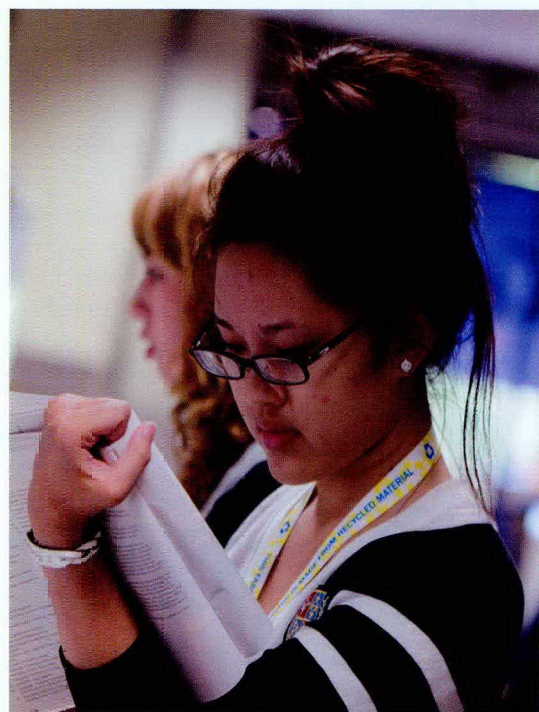
A truly transformed liberal education would involve interdisciplinary modules implemented within disciplinary courses to help students understand the interconnectedness of and relationality among disciplines, knowledge, and experience. Such an education would involve comparative, intersectional, and interdisciplinary study in history, philosophy, religious studies, literature, and political science. It would challenge students to engage with the core ideas of intersectionality, including social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice. These core ideas—including, especially, relationality and complexity—emerge from the human experience and are key to defining the liberal education of the twenty-first century, just as the relationship between identity and power—although circumscribed by binary thinking about different hierarchical categories of identity, such as slave and free, male and female—was integral to the foundational concepts of liberal arts and liberal education.

### **The high stakes for our future as a nation**

As alluded to above, the United States faces a violent conundrum of national identity that often seems continuous and unsolvable. Ethnocentrism, racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and religious intolerance, functioning at the systemic and individual levels, combine with a lack of a shared understanding of our past, resulting in a national failure to contend with our complex history. This conundrum intrudes upon dialogues across and about diversity at all levels; it hampers the inclusion of knowledge and of people needed to transform our disciplines, fields of study, and pedagogies. Moreover, the violent conundrum of national identity challenges, impedes, and even distorts efforts to embrace diversity through a commitment to equity and inclusive excellence. The ultimate result is an obliteration of shared aspirations toward the Common Good.

Historian Jill Lepore observed in a May interview that “all politics is really an argument about the relationship between the past and the future. And the more polarized our politics has become, the more polarized the past.”<sup>20</sup> It is worth remembering that in the 1990s, projects aimed at introducing race, gender, and class analyses into the curriculum were met with vicious opposition not unlike what intersectionality





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faces today. Critics now describe intersectionality, as many then described ethnic studies and women's studies, as "a quasi religion, one that stifles free expression on college campuses and threatens democracy itself" or as "advancing the view that 'identity politics trumps all.'"<sup>21</sup>

To the contrary, intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding the interactive dynamics of race, class, gender, and other categories of identity, thus providing the space to grapple with inequality and inequity and to tell the truth of our national history. It

also reveals the possibility for and potential avenues toward social justice, as new scholarship unearths the complex, conflictual, connected stories that constitute our national narrative. Learning and accepting this complicated narrative in all its beauty and ugliness is the only

way we can exorcise the horrors of the past and truly aspire to be the democratic republic we imagine ourselves to be.

Intersectionality as a concept and practice is rooted in the politics of identity—the multiplicity of identity, the social location of identity, and the power inequities maintained by defining identities as disconnected from their social, political, and economic locations. The politics of identity operates at the individual, group, regional, and national levels. Our challenge,

as I see it, is to embrace a national history that is relational and pluralistic—that seeks the generative in our differences and strives to correct our power inequities. Embracing that history requires us to approach our scholarship, pedagogy, and institutional and policy research in an intersectional, relational way, allowing us to embrace and examine complexities with greater attention to their details and, ultimately, greater understanding. At the pedagogical level, such an approach will equip our students to help guide our nation away from the apparently unsolvable conundrum of national identity toward the complex wholeness that is necessary to us as individuals, to our communities, and to our nation. □

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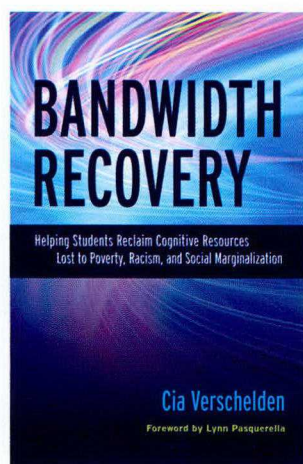
#### NOTES

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2. Tom Bartlett, "When a Theory Goes Viral," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Intersectionality-Wars/240095>.
3. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality: Key Concepts* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 129.
4. *I Am Not Your Negro: A Major Motion Picture*, directed by Raoul Peck from texts by James Baldwin (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 77.
5. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2015. In this article, Crenshaw succinctly describes the case in question: "In 1976, Emma DeGraffenreid and several other black women sued General Motors for discrimination, arguing that the company segregated its workforce by race and gender: Blacks did one set of jobs and whites did another. According to the plaintiffs' experiences, women were welcome to apply for some jobs, while only men were suitable for others. This was of course a problem in and of itself, but for black women the consequences were compounded. You see, the black jobs were men's jobs, and the women's jobs were only for whites.... [T]he court believed that black women should not be permitted to combine their race and gender claims into one. Because they could not prove that what happened to them was just like what happened to white women or black men, the discrimination that happened to these black women fell through the cracks."
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15. Johnnella Butler, "Difficult Dialogues," *The Women's Review of Books* 6, no. 5 (February 1989): 16.
16. Ibid.
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18. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949, 1994), 175–90. In the chapter "Two Men and a Bargain," Smith, in the form of a parable, explains how rich white men in the South convinced poor whites to distinguish their own conditions of poverty and brutal work circumstances from those of blacks—for example, by making common economic and racial cause with poor whites to keep wages low, by reminding poor whites that "any job's better than no job at all," and by implicitly supporting lynching.
19. See Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1993), 84–97.
20. Jill Lepore, "Americans Aren't Just Divided Politically, They're Divided Over History Too," *NPR Morning Edition*, May 17, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/05/23/529634859/americans-aren-t-just-divided-politically-they-re-divided-over-history-too>.
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## Bandwidth Recovery

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—Lynn Pasquerella,

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