

Intersectionality*

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Human worldmaking has always been shaped by power—understood, in its etymological root, as the capacity “to be able.” Its core function is to preserve itself: to dominate, structure society, and construct legitimising narratives that reinforce the power of those who wield it. Power is power because it is owned by very few only. As such, it is meant to serve those in power—like conferring a privileged access to resources and rights, representation and belonging. People in power make sure it stays this way. This power and the privileges thus granted to some are exclusive and particular. And this only works by denying many other people any access to these privileges. Those in power invent this to be norm/ality, which includes positioning themselves as the norm/ality that is destined and entitled to order the other ones as their “Other.” Those excluded from power are not just not able to access the privileges. What is more, those in power *other* human beings to exclude them from norm/ality so as to make them pay the bills for the people in power. The othered ones experience this exclusion as oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.

This is not about sensitivities or opinion. This is a violent structure that keeps repeating itself across generations and geographies, shaping both individual lives and collective histories. Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) famous insight “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” points to this very process: people are born into social positions as coded by power. Some are born on the very Olympus that is inaccessible to others. While the latter cannot but know this inequality and thus have to integrate it to their identity, those in power often do not even need to think about it (which is a privilege of its own). This is what Toni Morrison (1992, 9–10) refers to as “evasion,” as a means by which those in

* In this essay, I have adapted ideas and passages from another article (Arndt 2025) on intersectionality as theory of practice. The article in question is listed in the reference section.

power imagine that it is most normal that they are privileged. This allows them to not care about the consequences and, moreover, to blame that the Othered ones are responsible for their being excluded and discriminated against (Arndt 2020). Evasion can even stretch to outright denial of the existence of structural discrimination and inequality, allowing those in power to mistake structural discrimination as hypersensitivity, isolated incidents, or imagined grievance. This, however, fuels any discrimination. Because: What is not seen cannot be named, what is not named cannot be discussed, and what is not discussed cannot be transformed. As a result, injustice and discrimination remain just as intact as the power responsible for this.

Refusing to name oppressive structures for fear of reinforcing them risks rendering them invisible. This is why Gayatri Spivak (2014, 96) advocates for strategic essentialism: the tactical use of identity categories to expose and contest the logics of power that have created the positionalities that frame them. This is not about affirming fixed identities, but about challenging the underlying power and violence. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) call this a process of “abrogation and appropriation”—turning tools of oppression into instruments of resistance. One example is “Black” as a term of empowerment that fights the racist “n-word;” and the asterisk in “s*he” becomes a queering of gender binaries that transgresses the violence of the binary male-or-female-only-model.

Intersectionality is an intervention into this: it aims at naming, talking about, confronting, and intervening into power-structured forms of discrimination and inequality, while looking at the intersection of different modes of power. Intersectionality is, however, not to be reduced to multiple discrimination. Intersectionality is about the simultaneity of different strands of structural discrimination against Black woman.

The concept of intersectionality emerged from Black feminist critique, especially the recognition that neither mainstream *white* feminism nor decolonial or Black liberation movements adequately addressed the realities of Black women. Patriarchal structures pervaded Black liberation movements, while *white* feminism often claimed to speak for all women while implicitly centering *white* experiences only and doing racism. A stark example can be found in the writings of early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1830, 4.24) and Hannah More (1792, 305), who spoke of “women” without marking that they meant “white rich women only.” What is more, they used “slave” as a metaphor to describe the oppression of *white* women without acknowledging that Black women were not metaphorically, but literally and brutally

enslaved—and that white women are part and parcel of profiting from the European enslavement of Africans and colonial domination as well as of white supremacism in general. Very few Black women, like Sojourner Truth, were given some visibility in feminist spaces. Yet these moments were tokenistic and lacked critical engagement with colonialism, slavery, or racial apartheid.

This politics of ignoring given complexity is what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) calls “the danger of a single story.” Black feminists, such as Sojourner Truth or Zora Neale Hurston, challenged these defaults as early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a deeper theoretical reckoning thereof. “Womanism”—a Black feminist tradition shaped by thinkers like Alice Walker (1983) and Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1985)—emerged as a transdisciplinary alternative that bridged activism, art, and scholarship.

It was in this critical climate that Kimberlé Crenshaw published her foundational essay “Mapping the Margins” (1991), popularising the term “intersectionality.” Her analysis of the 1976 case *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*—in which Black women’s claims of discrimination were dismissed because, as it was argued, the company employed both Black men and *white* women—illustrated the need for a new framework to see that all the women who were employed were *white*; and all the Black people who were employed by were men.

Intersectionality was thus born to account for the ways racism and sexism, as well as classism, compound each other and are mutually constitutive. Drawing on the metaphor of a crossroad, Crenshaw proposed a prism through which we can see how different systems of oppression operate simultaneously and interdependently.

Starting from its focus on Black women, intersectionality has expanded to include other axes of power and oppression—such as ableism, heteronormativity, and coloniality—without abandoning its being grounded in the interplay of racism, sexism, and classism and the intersectional discrimination against Black women. Intersectionality is not simply a framework for recognizing “multiple discriminations;” it insists on examining how these dynamics interlock and shape one another—in the lifeworlds of Black women and, in complementary fashion, in other collective positionings.

With respect to this, it is important to stress that intersectionality is not just about discrimination. It also attends to privilege. Returning to the GM lawsuit as given sample: Black women were most discriminated against in terms of last hired and first fired. Black men were discriminated against by racism yet retained patriarchal privilege, while *white* women faced sexism but benefited from racism as *white* supremacy. Drawing from this interplay of being privi-

leged and being discriminated against, intersectionality thus not only analyses oppression but also pinpoints at power and privileges. And intersectionality insists that such privileges need to be reflected and invested into solidarity. This comprises envisioning *white* feminists confronting whiteness and Black men sharing power to challenge patriarchy.

Intersectionality is a recursive process: it observes the workings of power, communicates its findings, and develops interventions for structural change. But because systems of power are not static, neither is intersectionality. It must adapt its tools and methods in response to shifting social realities. At its core, intersectionality is a speculative, dynamic mode of critical thought—always seeking to understand, and to transform, the complex entanglements of power that structure our world.

Intersectionality has started off as a prism to see and name the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism. As such, it became a powerful tool of intervention and change in activism, arts and academia (in given intersections). Intersectionality has been mobilized and applied by social movements as well as in rhizomic fields of knowledge production.

As for academia, many scholars across all disciplines have employed intersectionality as a concept, while, for example, working from within of feminist theories or postcolonial theories. And just like feminism generated gender as a concept that eventually blossomed as a theory into a discipline that is pillared in numerous humanities, intersectionality exists as concept that has been advanced into a theory and established itself as an inter- and transdisciplinary discipline that not only spans academic fields but also, by its very objective, connects with activism and the arts. And this is why academia often recoils from intersectionality. It is wary of its being “too political”. To many, the term evokes activism rather than analysis, and thus threatens the illusion of scientific neutrality and objectivity. But is not the essence of scholarship to revise, to disrupt, to rethink knowledge, and the modes of the production thereof? Every major epistemic shift—every scientific revolution—has emerged in the context of broader societal transformations, transformations that inevitably intersect with politics.

Take the Manhattan Project: could it ever be considered apolitical? Or Galileo Galilei, who upended centuries of androcentric belief by proving that the Earth revolves around the sun. Because his findings challenged the authority of the Church, they were cast as political—even heretical. In the same way, the study of racism cannot be separated from politics. From the fifteenth century onward, entire disciplines—philosophy, theology, anthropology, biol-

ogy, linguistics—were complicit in constructing racism as a pseudo-scientific rationale for colonial conquest. This allowed imperial violence, from the Maafa to the Shoah, to be framed not as horror, but as mission, progress, or fate.

Such ideologies wore the mask of scientific legitimacy, and yet when today's scholars confront racism—especially from within literature, culture, or history—they are often dismissed for being “too political” or “ideological.” But silence is political, too. Not speaking up against racism, whether in a book studied on campus or on the bus driving toward it, is a political decision. How could such omissions and “I don't care”-attitudes *not* be political?

Indeed, power structures rightfully feel that intersectionality might give them a hard time. And this is why our collective endeavors to institutionalize academic intersectionality at the University of Bayreuth have been torpedoed throughout the last decade, without, however, being able to stop its path towards implementation. Thanks to Rüdiger Seesemann, and many others.

At first, in 2016, we founded the university network GeQuInDi (Gender, Queer, Intersectionality, and Diversity Studies). It was designed to be a network for academic activism with respect to both universitarian and societal challenges, for transdisciplinary research networks and teaching. This could not have been possible without visionary people like Miriam Bauch, the head and heart of Bayreuth's *Servicestelle Chancengleichheit*, and, for example, Fadi Saleh—who has held the first lecturer position in Intersectionality Studies at the University of Bayreuth, even all across Germany.

Building on offered interdisciplinary and cross-faculty courses in these areas, in 2019 we founded, with the support of Stefan Kurth from the *Servicestelle Diversität*, the supplementary study program “*Intersectionality Studies and Diversity Competencies*” (ZIDK).

During the same period, the research profile line “*Intersectionality*,” affiliated with the emerging research focus “*Cultural Encounters and Transcultural Processes*,” was developed as a foundational structure for research under the spokeswo*manship of Aleo Susan Arndt.

Intersectionality also became a central pillar of the Excellence Cluster “Africa Multiple. Reconfiguring African Studies.” In its first phase (2018–2025), this has been evidenced by numerous individual research projects, workshops, and lectures—such as those within the framework of the Knowledge Lab or the Intersectionality and Critical Diversity Literacy (ICDL) Lecture Series convened by the Gender and Diversity Office (GDO), Christine Vogt-William. Also, the Intersectionality Junior Research group as lead by Serawit Debele, contributed immensely to this. In the meantime, Serawit Debele's work was

awarded by the University of Bayreuth with a professorship on “Gender and Religion.”

All of these processes have been constantly supported and moulded by the Dean of the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple. Reconfiguring African Studies,” Rüdiger Seesemann. He also made intersectionality become a core agenda of the Cluster of Excellence, also explicitly spelling this out for the Cluster of Excellence’s second phase (2026 to 2033).

In 2021, the Faculty of Language and Cultural Studies of Bayreuth University awarded Kimberlé Crenshaw an honorary doctorate—in recognition of her pioneering work in establishing intersectionality as a research paradigm and as a promise to multiply her work.

In June 2022, Susan Arndt, Serawit Debele, Mario Faust-Scalisi, Matt Hannah, Kristin Skottki, and some more colleagues managed to found Europe’s first Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies as run by the trade-unionist Hans-Böckler-Foundation. Accordingly, the University of Bayreuth launched the Doctoral Program for Intersectionality Studies (PKIS), establishing a dedicated PhD curriculum “Intersectionality Studies.” In 2025, the professorship from Aleo Susan Arndt was eventually redenominated into “English Studies and Intersectionality Studies” by the Faculty Board of Language and Literatures.

Even though this has been a successful implementation of structures for doing intersectionality, this has been far from easy and far from being concluded. Throughout the process, there were many colleagues in powerful positions within the faculties or the university’s directorate who caused blockades, setbacks, and backlashes. This has been especially obvious with respect to our endeavor to implement Europe’s very first MA Intersectionality Studies. After ten years of fighting against this innovative studies program under false premises, coming up, again and again, with new demands, rules and hypocritic “concerns,” eventually the MA Intersectionality Studies is now about to reach a breakthrough. If all goes well, it will welcome its first students in 2027. Thanks to Rüdiger Seesemann’s countless efforts.

Yes, intersectionality confronts power, and it refuses to separate knowledge from the structures that shape and sustain inequality. But this commitment to justice does not undermine its scholarly value; rather, it deepens it. Intersectionality insists that theory must not be detached from life and world-making—that knowledge should serve transformation and that transformation should know how to strive for even futures. Far from weakening academic inquiry, its praxeological orientation strengthens it, offering a framework for

thinking and acting toward more equitable futures. Intersectionality holds the promise of building shared, sustainable, and more just worlds—across both global and local terrains. This is also what Rüdiger Seesemann's work has always been about.

It is by no means an exaggeration to hold that there would not be any Intersectionality Studies at the University of Bayreuth without Rüdiger Seesemann. He has been too good to be true as an unwavering ally and visionary. Being aware of *white* supremacy and the ways in which it has privileged him, he is most decisive about investing his privileges and vision into solidarity and the reconfiguration of the humanities from within Intersectionality Studies. His firm belief in the cause of intersectionality, as a means to pave better futures, made him invest his excellent knowledge of leadership and power structures into a reconfiguration of universitarian structures. His disgust for abuse of power, his visionary magic to think out of the box, his unprecedented research ethics, his dedicated fight against injustice and discrimination, his ability to hope into the future, his unique rhetorical skills to pin arguments down to what needs to be seen and said, and his love for human beings have been milestones for implementing intersectionality as a future pillar at the University of Bayreuth in a most sustainable way—and for a new era of Critical Humanities.

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