



black feminism reimagined after intersectionality **jennifer c. nash**

black feminism reimagined

NEXT WAVE New Directions in Women's Studies

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JENNIFER C. NASH

black feminism **reimagined** after intersectionality

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INTRODUCTION. feeling black feminism

In an article published in the *New Yorker* in 2016, Nathan Heller described intersectionality as the heart of contemporary student activism. He writes, “If the new campus activism has a central paradigm, it is intersectionality: a theory, originating in black feminism, that sees identity-based oppression operating in crosshatching ways.”¹ A year later, journalist Andrew Sullivan’s polemic against intersectionality was published in *New York Magazine*. He describes intersectionality as “the latest academic craze sweeping the American academy” and likened it to a “religion,” one that produces a dangerous “orthodoxy through which all of human experience is explained—and through which all speech must be filtered.”² If Heller envisioned intersectionality as the principle organizing campus activism, Sullivan treated it as a dangerous “academic craze” that “enforces manners” and “controls language and the very terms of discourse.”³ Both articles were largely—and correctly—condemned for representing students as hypersensitive and coddled, and for trafficking in deep misunderstandings of intersectionality’s histories, critical and political aspirations, and roots in black feminist theory.⁴ Yet what interests me about the articles—and the vociferous responses to them by scholars and activists on the US Left—is how “intersectionality,” a term that “has migrated from women’s studies journals and conference keynotes into everyday conversation, turning what was once highbrow discourse into hashtag chatter,” acted as *the* window through which to view either the imagined problems (or, in the case of the articles’ critics, the imagined progress) of the contemporary university.⁵ In some ways, it is

unsurprising that a term rooted in black women's intellectual production would be figured as a dangerous space of political excess, as an ideology that has colonized the hearts and minds of (vulnerable) college students, as this is precisely how black women's corporeal presences have been figured. Yet what is new, and even surprising, is the contention that intersectionality is at the center of the university's intellectual and political life, that an understanding of the contemporary university requires contending with intersectionality.

Black Feminism Reimagined is a project that carefully studies intersectionality's lives in the US university. The project was born from a deep curiosity about the variety of political and theoretical work that intersectionality is called upon to perform in the US academy, and in the peculiarly contentious battles that have been waged around intersectionality, battles which I argue implicate the body that haunts the analytic—black woman—even if she is not always explicitly named as such. If intersectionality functions as a barometer measuring—and calibrating—the political atmosphere of the US university, I argue that it has been most emphatically called upon to do corrective ecological work in the context of women's studies, and that it is in relationship to academic feminism that intersectionality's institutional life has taken shape. Indeed, in *Black Feminism Reimagined*, I treat intersectionality as women's studies' primary program-building initiative, as its institutional and ethical orientation, even as the field retains an ambivalent relationship with the analytic, always imagining it as simultaneously promising and dangerous, the field's utopic future and its past tense.⁶ Thus, this book largely focuses on the complicated and contentious relationship between intersectionality and women's studies, arguing that studying the field's engagement with intersectionality allows a window into the discipline's longer and fraught relationship with black feminist studies, and with black feminists.⁷ More than that, because women's studies has been a kind of laboratory for intersectionality's institutional life in the US academy, understanding feminist conversations about intersectionality as the remedy, the cure, the threat, or the peril enables an understanding of the debates that swirl around intersectionality in the university at large.

Black Feminism Reimagined explores what it has meant for black feminism—and black feminists—to have intersectionality come to occupy the center of women's studies and to migrate across disciplinary boundaries, to be both filled with promise and emptied of specific meaning. I ask how black feminists have made visible their collective feelings about intersectionality's

“citational ubiquity” in and beyond women’s studies, and about the black feminist affects that attend to the variety of hopes and perils that have been imaginatively tethered to the analytic.⁸ Thus, I imagine black feminism as an affective project—a felt experience—as much as it is an intellectual, theoretical, creative, political, and spiritual tradition. *Black Feminism Reimagined* argues that there is a single affect that has come to mark contemporary academic black feminist practice: *defensiveness*. I treat black feminist defensiveness as manifested most explicitly through black feminism’s proprietary attachments to intersectionality. These attachments conscript black feminism into a largely protective posture, leaving black feminists mired in policing intersectionality’s usages, demanding that intersectionality remain located within black feminism, and reasserting intersectionality’s “true” origins in black feminist texts. This book traces how defensiveness is largely articulated by rendering intersectionality black feminist property, as terrain that has been gentrified, colonized, and appropriated, and as territory that must be guarded and protected through the requisite black feminist vigilance, care, and “stewardship.”⁹ The project develops the term “holding on” to flag—and to unsettle—the set of practices that defensiveness unleashes, particularly the proprietary claim to intersectionality that continues to animate so much of black feminist engagement with intersectionality. In treating defensiveness as a defining black feminist affect, my intention is not to diagnose individual black feminists as defensive or to pathologize black feminist feelings. Nor is my impulse to ignore histories of antiblackness and misogyny—including the invisible labor of black women inside the academy that, quite literally, kills black female academics—that render black feminist defensiveness a political response to ongoing violence. I seek to ethically attend to that history even as I critique the proprietary impulses of black feminism in an effort to reveal how the defensive affect traps black feminism, hindering its visionary world-making capacities. If “holding on” describes the set of black feminist practices this project seeks to disrupt, “letting go” represents the political and theoretical worldview this project advances, a vision of black feminist theory that is not invested in making property of knowledge.

This book also argues that it is impossible to theorize black feminist defensiveness without a rigorous consideration of the place of black feminist theory generally, and intersectionality specifically, in women’s studies. *Black Feminism Reimagined* situates black feminist defensiveness in the context of US women’s studies, an interdisciplinary that is organized around the symbol

of black woman even as the field retains little interest in the materiality of black women's bodies, the complexity of black women's experiences, or the heterogeneity of black women's intellectual and creative production. Defensiveness emerges precisely because the symbol of black woman is incessantly called upon to perform intellectual, political, and affective service work for women's studies, much as black female faculty are called upon to perform diversity service work in women's studies and across the university.¹⁰ This particular form of feminist service work is evident in the general sentiment that women's studies can be remedied—or already has been remedied—through the incorporation of black feminist theory into the field's canon, through the hailing of black feminist theory as the remedy to (white) feminism's ills, or through the ways that black female faculty are called upon to embody and perform the field's transformation. Rachel Lee captures how women of color are rhetorically summoned as proof of the field's evolution, noting “women of color remain eminently useful to the progress narrative Women's Studies wishes to create for itself, where the fullness of women of color's arrival within Women's Studies is always ‘about to be.’”¹¹ Thus, black woman serves the discipline's “progress narrative,” acting as a sign of how much the discipline has overcome its past exclusions and how deeply the discipline refuses so-called white feminism, and intersectionality's ubiquity in women's studies is often taken as evidence of how black feminism has transformed the discipline.¹² While this book remains deeply invested in a consideration of black feminism's relationship to the university generally, and to women's studies specifically, it is crucial to note that black feminism—and black feminists—have long been attached, optimistically or self-destructively (or maybe both)—to the university. Indeed, black feminist theory has a long history of *both* tracking the violence the university has inflicted on black female academics (often by demanding black women's labor—intellectual, political, and embodied labor) *and* advocating for institutional visibility and legibility. While black feminists have long traced the violence of the university, few have advocated for abandoning the institutional project of black feminism, despite longstanding and widely circulating texts theorizing how the academy quite literally cannibalizes black women, extracts their labor, and renders invisible the work they perform to establish fields. Thus, when I consider the violence the university has inflicted on black women's bodies, I want to underscore that black feminism has remained oriented toward the university *despite* this violence, and has largely retained a faith in the institution's

capacity to be remade, reimagined, or reinvented in ways that will do less violence to black feminist theory and black feminists' bodies.

In naming defensiveness as a defining black feminist affect, *Black Feminism Reimagined* necessarily makes a claim about what constitutes black feminism. I treat black feminism as a varied project with theoretical, political, activist, intellectual, erotic, ethical, and creative dimensions; black feminism is multiple, myriad, shifting, and unfolding. To speak of it in the singular is always to reduce its complexity, to neglect its internal debates and its rich and varied approaches to questions of black women's personhood. I treat the word "black" in front of "feminism" not as a marker of identity but as a political category, and I understand a "black feminist" approach to be one that centers analyses of racialized sexism and homophobia, and that foregrounds black women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subjects, and as "freedom dreamers" even as the content and contours of those dreams vary.¹³ I advance a conception of black feminism that is expansive, welcoming anyone with an investment in black women's humanity, intellectual labor, and political visionary work, anyone with an investment in theorizing black genders and sexualities in complex and nuanced ways. My archive of black feminist theorists includes black, white, and nonblack scholars of color who labor in and adjacent to black feminist theory. My contention is that these varied black feminist scholars can all speak on and for black feminist theory, and as black feminist theorists, even as they make their claims from different identity locations. To be clear, my capacious conception of black feminism is a political decision, one that is staged mindful of black feminists' long-standing critique of how the university "disappears" black women.¹⁴ Shifting the content of black feminism from a description of bodies to modes of intellectual production might generate precisely the anxious defensiveness this book describes and aspires to unsettle. Nonetheless, I invest in a broad conception of black feminism—and black feminists—precisely because of my commitment to tracing black feminist theory's expansive intellectual, political, ethical, and creative reach, one that I see as always transcending attempts to limit the tradition by rooting it in embodied performances. Moreover, it is the ongoing conception that black feminism is the exclusive territory of black women that traps and limits black feminists and black women academics who continue to be conscripted into performing and embodying their intellectual investments.

The introduction unfolds in three parts. First, I offer an intellectual history of intersectionality. Then I turn to an institutional history of intersectionality

with a focus on the term's relationship to women's studies. In this section, I make explicit the book's decision to root itself in US women's studies even as intersectionality specifically and black feminism more broadly have intimate connections to other interdisciplinary projects, particularly black studies. Finally, I turn to explicating black feminist defensiveness and to situating this crucial and relatively new affect in the context of what I term the "intersectionality wars."

Intersectionality: An Intellectual History

In 2007, Ange-Marie Hancock noted, "A comprehensive intellectual history of intersectionality has yet to be published, with . . . significant ramifications that affect scholars seeking to conduct intersectional research and those seeking to understand the intellectual contributions of intersectionality."¹⁵ In the decade since Hancock's assertion, a number of scholars, including Brittney Cooper, Vivian May, Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, and Anna Carastathis, have invested in historicizing intersectionality as a key strategy for understanding the term's varied disciplinary genealogies and interdisciplinary migrations. In my earlier work, I criticized the historical turn in intersectionality studies, suggesting that it is often undergirded by a search for a "true" intersectionality or by an attachment to a fictive past when intersectionality was practiced in ways that more "correctly" align with its foundational texts. As I argued, "The impulse toward historicization all too often becomes a battle over origin stories, a struggle to determine who 'made' intersectionality, and thus who deserves the 'credit' for coining the term, rather than a rich engagement with intersectionality's multiple genealogies in both black feminist and women of color feminist traditions."¹⁶ Thus, I enter the terrain of historicizing intersectionality with a sense of caution and an awareness of the potential risks of fetishizing history as the preferable orientation toward understanding intersectionality's varied work. Here, I offer an intellectual history of intersectionality that emphasizes that intersectionality is part of a cohort of terms that black feminists created in order to analyze the interconnectedness of structures of domination. In other words, as Deborah King notes, "The necessity of addressing all oppressions is one of the hallmarks of black feminist thought," even as intersectional thinking has unfolded around different keywords, analytics, and theories.¹⁷

While intersectional histories have long included Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah King, and Frances