

Anna Carastathis

Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons

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Director of the Humanities Center and a professor of women's and gender studies at Syracuse University, **Vivian M. May** has published widely on Black feminist intellectual histories, intersectionality, and feminist theory and literature. In addition to numerous articles, she is the author of two books: the first, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (Routledge, 2007), shows how Cooper deserves a much wider audience for her innovative and often daring contributions to a Black feminist public sphere. Her most recent book, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (Routledge, 2015), demonstrates how often intersectionality is resisted, misunderstood, and misapplied and pushes for more meaningful engagement with intersectionality's radical ideas, histories, and justice orientations.

In *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*, published as part of the Expanding Frontiers book series edited by Karen Leong and Andrea Smith, Anna Carastathis confronts an enduring obstacle to taking up intersectionality's potential: she illustrates how an ongoing, monist fragmentation of identities, communities, politics, and perceptions buttresses power hierarchies and reinforces exclusion by design. Specifically, Carastathis invites readers to fundamentally "reorient" our perceptions (xvi) by approaching intersectionality as a *provisional* concept and "point of departure" (rather than offering an epistemic or political guarantee, as a destination or point of arrival). Reading intersectionality as a "horizon of possibility" (2), Carastathis highlights how it disrupts sedimented habits of mind, political norms, and scholarly practices, and fundamentally "disorients" (10) by naming and exposing structured elisions, false universals, and constitutive absences built into monist, categorical norms. Carastathis aims both to "contest the ease with which we deny our connections" (xvi) and to challenge readers, from within and across our divergent positionalities and social locations, to reflect carefully about how intersectionality is debated, utilized, circulated, and generally understood in feminist research, teaching, and political organizing.

Carastathis's text is explicitly in conversation with numerous scholars, and she challenges how intersectionality has been cast, critiqued, and also celebrated (for example, via being turned into a kind of methodological tool, political guarantee, and even racial alibi). She adeptly and repeatedly shows how "nonfragmentation" of the phenomenological "may be the most elusive" aspect of intersectionality's possibilities (59). In a sustained effort to disrupt intersectionality's instrumentalization as a positivist tool of progressivist (white, settler colonial) feminism(s), Carastathis embarks on a twofold project. First, she demonstrates how intersectionality is often deployed (or dismissed) in ways that reinforce many of the key problems it has exposed and contested (including structural, representational, and political hierarchies, exclusion by design, enforced erasure and silencing, and failed or impeded solidarities). To this end, Carastathis spends substantial time throughout the book engaging in close readings of Kimberlé Crenshaw's writings, particularly her two early essays, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" and "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against

Women of Color" (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Carastathis's readings illustrate the richness of Crenshaw's philosophical contributions and demonstrate how little attention has been paid by feminist theorists and philosophers to the nuances of Crenshaw's ideas. Throughout the volume, Carastathis also urges readers to divest from triumphal (settler) progress ideas about intersectionality as a positivist tool or guarantee, and to engage more deeply with its provisional possibilities and social-justice origins.

To begin to unpack how a kind of undoing, denial, or distortion of intersectionality has played out, often in its own name, Carastathis traces the concept's intellectual-political history and draws distinctions within its genealogy. She is interested in honoring its social justice origins and, specifically, intersectionality's genealogy within US Black and women-of-color feminisms, while, at the same time, underscoring that this history is too often framed in ways that conflate ideas and politics that are distinct, even if they have some shared histories, insights, and goals. Carastathis emphasizes contexts and texts that are often forgotten or undertheorized (for example, she offers an insightful mapping of Black feminist Marxist and communist histories that must be engaged with more fully). Simultaneously, she refuses to collapse a range of ideas within Black feminist intellectual-political traditions, despite the fact that several of these concepts are frequently treated as interrelated, or even conflated by other scholars.

The book is comprised of six chapters, and although portions of chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 have been previously published, the impact of Carastathis's interrelated arguments builds momentum across the book's layered chapters. In the first chapter, she maintains that simplistic snapshots of intersectionality's origins in Black feminist and women of color traditions are problematic; however, she argues, how intersectionality's histories are traced often treats distinct analyses as interchangeable when, in fact, there are important political and analytical differences, and distinct implications, that must be understood. In particular, intersectionality's exposure of exclusion by design and its critique of discrete categories of analysis and identity are too often ignored, thus merely "intersecting" race and gender, for example, does nothing to contest the exclusion and power at work within each category--such that intersecting them compounds, rather than reveals, this exclusion by design (22–24, 53).

Reminding readers that intersectionality is, in her view, a distinctive "index of exclusion and power" (24) with a particular history, set of insights, and political possibilities, Carastathis parses nuances among Frances Beale's idea of double jeopardy, the Third World Women's Alliance's concept of triple jeopardy, Deborah King's notion of multiple jeopardy, the Combahee River Collective's analysis of interlocking systems of oppression, and Patricia Hill Collins's matrix-of-domination approach. She then turns to Crenshaw's delineation of intersectionality as structural, political, and representational in its analyses and aims, as well as Crenshaw's critique of how "monism" or single-axis thinking reproduces harm and inequality by making compound claims impossible, upholding hierarchy, and rendering simultaneity and relational power and privilege invisible. Near the close of the first chapter, Carastathis explores several "analytic benefits" imputed to intersectionality (simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity), particularly in recent efforts to treat intersectionality as a tool or paradigm (53–58). She states that these benefits are more akin to "commitments" than methodological practices (59), particularly because research norms often require that "priorities" be identified--such that the

irreducibility of different histories, identities, and sites of power, more often than not, may paradoxically "displace simultaneity" in intersectional work (59).

In the second chapter, Carastathis examines the wider implications of Crenshaw's use of the basement metaphor (Crenshaw 1989) to show how scholars regularly ignore Crenshaw's analysis of hierarchy (71). She then engages in a careful reading of some recent case law to illustrate how pervasive bias against Black women continues, as does an insidious bias toward maintaining structural, representational, and economic privileges in antidiscrimination law. Carastathis demonstrates how antidiscrimination law continues to operate via additive, monist categories and single, causal events and hierarchies (86), which retains and reinforces the normative exclusions and erasures within any given category (for example, race or sex) intact. She also shows how "antidiscrimination law has been doctrinally reframed" to target the disparate treatment of dominant groups (78)--meaning that "racial victimization," for instance, has been twisted into the right to dominate and exclude: in such cases, whites are found to be "victims" of racial bias when they are no longer treated as the norm with the (unstated but operative) privilege to be dominant in the workplace (79). Intersectionality, Carastathis argues, requires that we ask not only who is an impossible subject, and what claims are impossible, but also what is inadmissible (for example, context, history, structural critiques). Because the law operates via singular (exclusionary) categories that presuppose power and privilege on all other counts but the one in question, and due to its focus on single instances of discrimination, abstracted and "excised" from history (93), Carastathis concludes this chapter with a discussion of geographies of power and contests the ways in which intersectionality is too often flattened, rather than understood as an intervention into the ways in which social hierarchies and violent exclusions are perpetuated and institutionalized.

In the third chapter, Carastathis turns to an overlooked footnote in Crenshaw's 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins," wherein she describes intersectionality as a *provisional* concept--or, as Carastathis describes it, as a kind of "sensibility" that "anticipates, rather than arrives at, the normative or theoretical goals often imputed to it" (107). She suggests we approach intersectionality as a "point of departure, not arrival" (108) that requires us to "think about how we think" (111). However, rather than engage with intersectionality as akin to a form of disorientation and disruption, which Carastathis advocates, intersectionality is too often avoided via two seemingly opposite (if equally superficial) mechanisms: overstating or minimizing its role (for example, intersectionality as guarantee/remedy or as mere metaphor that "does" nothing) (106). Both inflating and deflating approaches tend toward an essentialist and positivist notion of intersectionality, which Carastathis finds to be deeply incompatible with a provisional approach (116) because a positivist operationalization of intersectionality deploys the normative/received categories that intersectionality critiques (because they exclude by design, presuppose privilege as normative, and rely on conceptual and political separability in order to function) (117). Positivist interpretations fail to understand how intersectionality *exposes and contests* monism by revealing what's/who's missing, by making invisibility visible (118). Furthermore, inflated positivist approaches also often "de-racinate" intersectionality, treating it as a corrective, a form of moral rescue for white feminism: intersectionality is annexed or coopted to recenter whiteness and to maintain the right to "be" the feminist subject/speaker (120–23).

In the fourth chapter, Carastathis takes up eight categories of intersectionality critiques (four main ones--Scalar, Infinite Regress, Mutual Exclusion, and Reinscription critiques, and particular versions of the first four critiques--Marxist, New Materialist, Assemblage, and Post-Intersectionality). She acknowledges differences across these interpretive debates, but Carastathis finds key similarities in their theorizing about and framing of intersectionality. First, she argues, all eight modes of critique oversimplify and reduce intersectionality by, for example, sidestepping key intersectional challenges and insights (133), by taking intersectionality's *engagement* with dominant assumptions and logics as *evidence* of its advocacy or belief in them (134), by ignoring the conceptual and political limitations of monism highlighted by intersectionality (136), or by reducing intersectionality to a version of additive positivism (147) or of determinist victimization theory (149). Furthermore, *none* "grant the concept provisionality with regard to the categories it critically engages" (127)--and, in fact, Carastathis concludes, more often than not, intersectionality is "evacuated" of provisionality altogether (140). In diverse ways, intersectionality's possibilities as a "horizon of political contestation" (141), its challenges to "biopolitical power" and necropolitics (153–55), and its exposure of the intersection as a place of *invisibility and erasure*, not of "representation" (148), are repeatedly ignored if not denied.

In chapter 5, Carastathis takes up coalitional identity, internal heterogeneity, "complex unities," and the ways in which we are "constituted by internal differences" and "shaped by internal and external power relations" (165). She begins with an in-depth look at the intersectional, transnational political organizing of *Somos Hermanas*, a group whose ideas, ethos, and organizational labors generally are left out of social-movement histories (179). Carastathis clarifies that intersectional political coalitions are not organized around shared experiences or identities, but, as Cathy Cohen has articulated, "a shared marginal relationship to dominant power" (Cohen 1997, 148, in Carastathis, 174). Carastathis returns to the undertheorized (and irreconcilable) tensions between positivist/essentialist and provisional/coalitional approaches to intersectionality. "Descriptive" positivist approaches to intersectionality accept normative/given identity categories, rely on a politics of inclusion not transformation, and generally leave dominance undisturbed (187). In contrast, if one approaches intersectional identity as coalitional, the categories' inadequacy and violence is exposed because relational power and privilege, internal heterogeneity, and questions of dominance and difference within group are at the forefront (188). Drawing on María Lugones's work examining how relations of domination can be expressed horizontally (that is, margin to margin and also within group) (194), Carastathis emphasizes that it is not *differences* that undermine coalitions, but relations of dominance (192).

In the sixth chapter, Carastathis challenges the false dichotomy between transnational and intersectional feminisms, which "conceals coalitional" possibilities, identities, and labors, "naturalizes" settler coloniality, and reifies methodological nationalism (200). She raises some important questions about "decolonial 'border thinking' about intersectionality" as well as impediments to coalitions (201). Carastathis clarifies that she is not approaching coloniality as one more "axis of oppression" to be included as a kind of subfield or addition to an intersectional framework (203). Rather, she is interested in thinking through the question, "Can intersectionality coalesce with decolonial feminism in order to address and redress the deep structures and continually unfolding historical processes that constitute settler colonialism?" (211).

For instance, in intersectionality's confrontation of the law (which is not merely a reformist plea for "inclusion" in the settler state), Carastathis sees potential for intersectionality to address enduring coloniality at work in the categories "still widely employed in social-justice projects" (208) and to help make visible how some subjects come to "arrogate" and "territorialize liberation discourses" (212). At the same time that intersectionality can be engaged to help expose "how coloniality of power pervade[s] and undermine[s] cultures of resistance" (212), Carastathis argues, we must also examine how "racialized and minoritized groups are complicit in settler coloniality," particularly with regard to the politics of unceded land and via "appeals to state power to recognize or legitimate their justice claims" (209), both of which are forms of "colonial entitlements" that adhere to oppressive logics and ontologies (214). Intersectionality's provisional and disorienting qualities hold possibilities, Carastathis maintains, for the kinds of coalitions, as well as forms of epistemic disobedience and "threshold thinking," needed to contest enduring coloniality (211). If intersectionality is engaged as provisional and coalitional, specifically via a politics of refusal, and not recognition or representation (232), there are generative possibilities for decolonial intersectionality and for decolonizing intersectionality.

Carastathis concludes by turning to the ways in which the field of women's, gender, and sexuality studies "fetishizes difference," is fixated on counter-hegemonic thinking, relies on a "commodity model of knowledge production," and places a "special premium" on "radicalism." She challenges readers to confront how attempts to out-radicalize one another can commodify innovation, reward competition, and reproduce settler colonial, capitalist logics and economies of knowledge (235). Rather than supersede or transcend intersectionality, approach it as an epistemological, ethical, or political guarantor, or continue to remain " beholden to monistic concepts of oppression and identity," Carastathis concludes by urging that we engage intersectionality as a "profoundly destabilizing, productively disorienting, provisional concept" (237)--as a coalition to be inhabited and a praxical "horizon" that serves as both threshold and limit to our collective work (239).

Carastathis's book is both timely and thoughtful. Although students in my seminar found that Carastathis's arguments could sometimes benefit from being more explicitly delineated and more directly stated (there are some areas where Carastathis's insights and voice are somewhat difficult to ascertain or to disentangle from those of the many other scholars she engages), they also greatly appreciated how Carastathis repeatedly and persuasively challenged positivist approaches to intersectionality. In particular, students found the author's emphasis on intersectionality as provisional, on identity as necessarily (and always substantively and politically) coalitional, on the need to approach intersectionality as a point of departure, and on the futility (and indeed the violence) of simply intersecting monist or single-axis (and exclusionary by design) categories or politics to be especially fruitful and provocative for thinking through their own ethical, political, ontological, and epistemological negotiations of intersectionality.

References

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