

Feminist Theory and the Representation of Diversity

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THIS IS A DRAFT VERSION

This paper is on representation in a discursive, epistemic sense. It addresses the self-representation of the collective subject of feminism. This subject is all but fixed. But feminists – political theorists as much as political activists – need at least working notions of this subject. Given that feminists are not one, but rather a diverse set of individuals as well as groups that inhabit different geographical and social locations and that pursue differing goals and agendas, it comes as no surprise that the self-representation of the collective subject of feminism, or, in other words, that the representation of diversity within feminism is an eminently political issue, and therefore a core concern of feminist political theory. This is even more so since the inner-feminist diversity relates in complex ways to entanglements of various forms of differentiation, power and inequality; therefore, the way in which diversity is represented in feminist theory can hardly be separated from the way in which feminist theory addresses its main target, namely sexism in the broadest sense of this term.¹

Today, there are rather distinct approaches to representing diversity within feminist theory. Each of them has its own theoretical, methodological and political implications. In what follows, I concentrate on two of these approaches. Both are of particular prominence within and without feminist theory and have contributed to considerable theoretical renewal during the last decades and years. Furthermore, both are rooted in political struggle and have

¹ Following a recent working definition from the German dictionary Brockhaus, sexism can be said to include gender-related forms of discrimination, oppression, contempt or disadvantage as well as the forms of knowledge they are based on (cf. Brockhaus vol. 20: 110).

attempted to maintain at least some of their political fervor in the process of their respective academization.² The first one is intersectionality research, the second one is connected to postcolonial studies. With regard to both approaches, and each time drawing on the work of a few exemplary authors, I ask two questions: First, how is diversity conceptualized and represented? Second, in which way does this representation differ from the representation put forward in the rival approach, and where do they overlap? Finally, I suggest ways in which some of their respective insights might be combined.³

1.

Intersectionality research has its roots in black and women of color feminism, which could never restrict its critical analysis to a single axis of differentiation, or to a single section of inequality – the well-known 1977 Combahee River Collective statement that “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression (...) are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective 2000: 272) is a case in point.⁴ Over the last years, the field has broadly expanded. After U.S. critical legal theorist and anti-discrimination legislation specialist Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality” in an essay published in 1989 (Crenshaw 1989), currently, this term is informing intense theoretical as well as methodological and empirical work that more and more transcends the original group-based orientation and seeks for intersectional

² The extent to which they have succeeded in this attempt is – unsurprisingly so – contested.

³ Both intersectionality research and feminist postcolonial studies are very broad and rather diverse fields of scholarship. Therefore, any general claim about them runs the risk of misrepresentation. Drawing on exemplary authors in this paper cannot do away with this risk, but is an attempt to be as specific as possible and thereby to hopefully limit the mentioned risk.

⁴ Other early sources include books and essays by authors as diverse as bell hooks (1981; 1984), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (Collins 1991) and Hazel Carby (1982) – and there are comparable texts from countries outside of the Anglophone world, as well.

interpretations of policies, social dynamics and practices, social and political structures and the like (cf. Hancock 2007a; Weldon 2008; Lykke 2010).⁵

So how is diversity represented in this field? In order to answer this question, I will primarily draw on two texts. The first one is Leslie McCall's seminal article *The Complexity of Intersectionality* in which she distinguishes what she calls anti-, intra-, and intercategory approaches to intersectionality and embraces the latter for conducting quantitative research on wage inequalities (McCall 2005). The second one is Iris Marion Young's essay *Structural Injustice and the Politics of Difference*, which offers a political theory approach to the relation of different forms of difference and injustice (Young 2009).

McCall defines intersectionality as referring to "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" in order to overcome "the limitations of gender as a single analytical category" (McCall 2005: 1771). The focus of her account is clearly on research categories – on the question of which categories are chosen for a particular research, and on the question of how any chosen categories are employed.

In order to systemize and to evaluate such category usage within the broad field of intersectional research, McCall introduces the aforementioned distinction between anti-, intra- and intercategory approaches. According to this distinction, anticategorical approaches are concerned with the homogenizing, essentializing and excluding effects of common analytical categories and therefore challenge them, employing methods like genealogy, deconstruction and ethnography. Intracategorical approaches, by contrast, are rather critical of "broad and

⁵ The range of issues addressed and assessed from an intersectional perspective is constantly increasing – particularly in empirical research within the social sciences. Currently, intersectional research includes studies of equality policies (Verloo 2006; Marx Ferree 2008) and of human rights policy (Yuval-Davis 2006), the study of social and political inequality (Weldon 2006; Walby 2007), legal studies (Grabham et al. 2009), qualitative and quantitative politics research (Hancock 2007a, b) as well as work in political science subfields like electoral analysis (García Bedolla and Scola 2006) and policy analysis (Hankivksy and Cormier 2011).

sweeping acts of categorization” than of “categorization per se.” (ibid. 1779) They sub-divide common categories in order to focus on complexities *within* given social groups. Therefore, they are those of the three approaches that most closely relate to the group-based, or, in Ange-Marie Hancock’s terminology, content-based beginnings of intersectional analyses in black and women of color feminism (Hancock 2007a: 249). Intercategorical approaches, finally, assess the complex relations among multiple social groups. They don’t presuppose the nature of such relations, but rather study empirically “whether meaningful inequalities among groups even exist in the first place” (McCall 2005: 1785). The focus of this approach is precisely on “relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories” (ibid. 1786); but it must be stressed that the aspects of relationality that come into play here are restricted to the results of complex comparisons of group distinctions, for instance with regard to income. Intracategorically intersectional studies of income inequality would for instance – to give the example of McCall’s own empirical work – look at income gaps between various subgroups distinguished by gender, class and “race” in differing regional economies to be able to make claims about the exact types of wage inequalities that can be found in such differing economies.⁶

Iris Marion Young addresses issues of intersectionality not so much with a methodological interest in quantitative research on inequality, like McCall does, but rather with an interest in theorizing structural forms of injustice beyond the liberal, difference-blind equality paradigm, and in thinking about suitable ways of redressing these. Like other intersectionality theorists,

⁶ Among McCall’s findings is that „heavily unionized blue-collar cities with a recent history of deindustrialization such as Detroit exhibit relatively modest class and wage inequality among employed men but elevated gender wage inequality and class inequality among employed women (relative to average levels of wage inequality in the United States as a whole). In contrast, a postindustrial city such as Dallas exhibits the opposite structure of inequality – it is marked more by class and racial inequality than gender inequality.“ (McCall 2005: 1789) McCall uses such findings to suggest location specific policies to reduce these differing types of wage inequalities.

Young explicitly addresses issues of disability, ethnic and “racial” inequality as well as of gender inequality. But rather than merely interrogating the categories involved in these issues, like proponents of the anticategorical approach would do, or than focusing on how these issues subdivide common categories like the abled and the disabled, men and women, or blacks and whites, as the intracategorical approach would suggest, and furthermore differing from intercategorical comparisons of the differences between such subgroups, Young chooses another path. She differentiates between politics of positional difference, which concentrate on issues of structural inequality, and politics of cultural difference that are mainly concerned with matters of freedom (Young 2009: 275).

With regard to the politics of positional difference, social groups are conceptualized as “constituted through interactions that make categorical distinctions among people in hierarchies of status or privilege.” (ibid. 275) Redress requires the recognition of group differences and a reworking of these differences – be it by means of compensation for disadvantage, by a revaluation of attributes that members of particular social groups are faced with, or by other means of empowerment and meeting special needs. For Young, the paradigmatic case of such structural forms of inequality and injustice is disability (ibid. 276).

Politics of cultural difference, by contrast, refer to liberal concepts of multiculturalism and address forms of injustice arising in societies that are diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or religion, but don’t sufficiently accommodate different ethnic, national or religious groups’ practices and cultural expressions – politics of cultural difference address issues concerning the public recognition of ethnic, national and religious diversity in liberal societies (ibid. 285).

According to Young, both approaches that she distinguished, the politics of positional difference and the politics of cultural difference, complement each other. Nevertheless, she criticizes the latter approach on three grounds. First, for underplaying structural forms of injustice like racism, second, for being too state-centered and for therefore neglecting the role of civil society with respect to the enactment and redress of injustice, and, third, finally, for

relying too much on notions of toleration. As an effect of the latter, they would problematically reproduce dominant social norms, rather than challenge them. According to Young, this happened particularly when gender relations were employed to differentiate between a supposedly liberal, gender-equal “us”, and a decidedly more sexist “them” (ibid. 289ff.).

So how is diversity represented in these accounts of intersectionality? First it can be stressed that both authors – but McCall much more so than Young – focus on difference *categories* and the effects such categories have for the societal position of individuals who pertain to distinct social groups. Doing this, they refer to categories and social groups that are commonly seen as politically relevant, and that therefore precede any intersectional study or account. Second, the principal aim of intersectional approaches is to enhance complexity and inclusiveness in research on gender, inequality and injustice – precisely by addressing different difference categories and their effects in conjunction. Gender as a research and diversity category is thereby both fragmented and de-centered. Third, relations between social groups are stressed – at least in McCall’s intercategory approach and by Iris Marion Young. Nevertheless, when McCall assesses relations, she merely compares group distinctions – it is rather numbers and figures that relate than individuals or social groups that interact. Furthermore, due to the nature of the research that she is engaged in, McCall’s comparisons and assessments of relations are always quantifiable. She can give detailed accounts of, for instance, wage gaps between two given groups; but she must remain silent with regard to more subtle power relations such two groups may be connected through. Iris Marion Young, for her part, focuses on “relations of privilege and disadvantage where some people’s opportunities for the development and exercise of their capacities are limited and they are vulnerable to having the conditions of their lives and action determined by others without reciprocation.” (ibid. 283) But she, too, is more interested in the gaps between social groups that arise in such relations and suitable ways of closing such gaps, than in the complex

interactions that members of groups differing in such a way have, or might have, with each other. As I will try to show in the next section, this is different in postcolonial feminist theories.

2.

Postcolonial studies critically assess the ways in which legacies of colonialism, as well as forms of neocolonialism, inform and shape our postcolonial world. Postcolonial feminist theories concentrate on the gender aspects of these issues as well as on the challenges that they create for the political project of global feminism.⁷ Given this program, postcolonial feminist theories seem more historically and more globally oriented than many of the positions put forward within current intersectionality research. I want to illustrate this claim by recourse to the work of two authors, namely Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is probably best known for her 1984 essay “Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, which later became the opening piece of her monograph *Feminism Without Borders* (Mohanty 2003). In this early essay, Mohanty critically analyzes Western feminist scholarship on the global South and takes issues with the representation, namely the homogenizing and victimizing notions of “Third World women” that she finds there. To Mohanty, such discursive constructions “colonize the constitutive complexities that characterize the lives of women in these countries” (ibid. 19). For her, the basic characteristic of such scholarship is that it uses “the West” as natural reference point, as yardstick for the representation of Others; it is driven by “ethnocentric universality” and marked by what she calls an “inadequate self-consciousness about the effects of Western

⁷ Postcolonial studies constitute a very broad field of transdisciplinary research. For a first overview, see Loomba (2005) and Kerner (2012) as well as the edited volumes by Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin (1995), Goldberg/Quayson (2002), Desai/Niar (2005) and Loomba et. al. (2005); with regard to gender issues Lewis/Mills (2003).

scholarship on the Third World in the context of a world system dominated by the West.”
(ibid.)

According to Mohanty, there are three representational strategies that lead to the textual effects that she takes issue with. First, a notion of “women” as a coherent, homogenous, pre-social group with common concerns and interests, which furthermore translates into concepts of gender and gender relations that are assumed to be universally and cross-culturally applicable. Second, uncritical methods of providing supposed “proof” of universality and cross-cultural validity, like a hasty arithmetic (“the greater the number of women who wear the veil, the more universal is the sexual segregation and control of women”, ibid. 33) or the lack of contextualization. Finally, and as an effect of the former two aspects, homogenizing assumptions of female oppression, which lead to the notion of an average “Third World woman” who is sexually constrained by her gender, and who is seen to be poor, uneducated, ignorant, traditional etc. by her being from the “Third World” (ibid. 21f.). Mohanty holds that such images are in stark contrast with Western feminist self-representations as free, educated, and modern. This juxtaposition illustrates why she finds the former images victimizing and objectifying (ibid. 23).

As an alternative way of doing scholarship, a way that avoids the representational problems just mentioned, Mohanty suggests what she calls “careful, politically focused, local analyses”, that refrain from applying pre-given notions of “women” and “female oppression” to ever new contexts, as much as from over-generalizing their results (ibid. 32). This implies studying the local specifics of what at first sight might appear as universal patterns and problems. Aspects as diverse as female genital cutting, marriage, dependency and family arrangements, the sexual division of labor, religious practices and the gendered effects of the economy should be interpreted and theorized within specific societies and contexts – in order to be able to fully understand them, but also to be able to effectively work towards changing them.

Concerning such political activism, it is important to stress that Mohanty is far from opposing transnational feminist practices. Nevertheless, she is highly critical of the homogenizing concept of global sisterhood. In an essay that she wrote on the politics of experience, she decidedly takes issue with this concept for implying transcultural correlations of experiences, perspectives, interests and political goals of women. To Mohanty, such thinking is strongly reductive. She holds that experiences of women are influenced by more components than by femaleness – and that due to frictions between different influences and loyalties they would often be discontinuous and fragmented (ibid. 122). With regard to a global feminist project, she furthermore claims that it should not restrict itself to anti-patriarchal struggle. Instead it was “the current *intersection* of anti-racist, anti-imperialist and gay and lesbian struggles which we need to understand to map the ground for feminist political strategy and critical analysis” (ibid. 120). In place of sisterhood she prefers strategic coalitions that acknowledge internal differences, power relations, and conflict.

If such coalitions are to work, successful communication is crucial. It is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” that addresses some of the challenges of such communication. In this text, Spivak focuses on the question of “how the third-world subject is represented within Western discourse,” and she offers “an alternative analysis of the relations between the discourses of the West and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern woman” (Spivak 1988: 271). Spivak employs the term “subaltern” following the usage of Ranajit Guha from the Indian *Subaltern Studies Group*, who defines it as “an identity-in-differential”, as an “irretrievably heterogeneous” social group embracing everyone who doesn’t belong to the dominant groups in society (ibid. 284). According to her, both in the context of colonial production and of its displacement, the international division of labor, the subaltern cannot speak (ibid. 287). By this she doesn’t mean that individuals pertaining to this social group lacked the ability to voice their concerns. She rather means that they are not

heard, that they are hardly taken seriously – because the Western discourse does not reckon with complex self-representations of members of the subaltern classes.

Spivak's probably most prominent example for this communicative dysfunction is that of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, a young woman who committed suicide in 1920s Calcutta. When her body was found, she was menstruating; but this fact did not hinder her family to attribute her self-inflicted death to an illegitimate pregnancy. Only much later a letter was found in which Bhaduri explained the cause of her suicide. The letter revealed that she had been active in the armed anti-colonial struggle; when she realized that she wasn't able to commit a political murder, as she had been asked to, she decided to end her own life. Foreseeing that her family would most probably and mistakenly interpret her death as the result of an illegitimate passion, she waited with it until her menstruation. Nevertheless, a striking act of misinterpretation took place. It is in this sense that Spivak holds that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read." (ibid. 308)

This is also the case in another example Spivak gives, namely the British codification of Hindu law in colonial India, particularly the colonial reinterpretation of the rules for the so-called "widow sacrifice". When the British abolished this practice in 1829, they represented this abolition as the termination of a sexist tradition – Spivak therefore interprets it as act of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (ibid. 297). According to Hindu scriptures, though, the self-sacrifice of widows was far from being a common practice, but rather seen as an exception from the effective prohibition of suicide. According to Spivak, the reason why the practice was nevertheless rather common in 18th and early 19th century Bengal can be attributed to the fact that in this region widows were entitled to inherit property – and that families-in-law managed to use the appeal to a widow's self-immolation due to her devotion for her deceased husband to protect their belongings.

Spivak, now, is far from approving of such family practices. Nevertheless she denounces the way in which "imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the

espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind” – for it implies the victimization of non-Western women as an effect of precisely the Western claim to speak for these women (ibid. 299). And it must be stressed that according to Spivak, an anti-Western stance that is nurtured by nostalgia for pre-colonial roots is no solution, either. The indigenous colonial elite romanticized female acts of self-sacrifice and thereby left women in a highly precarious situation, as well (ibid. 297).

How then could alternative ways of representation and communication look like, especially if they are to transcend the strong boundaries of difference once drawn by colonialism and re-actualized today by the international division of labor? According to Spivak, this would require a serious effort of those on the privileged side of such boundaries “to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” (ibid. 295) – a task that is impossible without the attempt of communicating on a par with each other.

When we now look at how diversity is addressed in Mohanty’s and Spivak’s accounts, several aspects come to mind. First, neither Mohanty nor Spivak look at issues of diversity and of differences and power between women merely in terms of integrating a variety of common and therefore pre-existing difference categories into a complex study of the interplay of these categories and their possible effects, like most intersectionality scholars do. Rather, they are interested in critically assessing the way in which Western feminist scholarship – as a particular case of Western representational practices – is implicated in the construction of such differences, how it produces and reproduces images that are crucial for organizing common boundaries of social and political difference between distinct groups of people. Second, Mohanty’s and Spivak’s work is decidedly global in scope, while most intersectionality research is rather driven by methodological localism or at least nationalism. This holds particularly with regard to the geographical space within which authors pertaining

to both camps look at diversity issues. Third, relations play a rather distinct role in intersectional and in postcolonial studies. Whereas the former are mostly interested in relations in terms of comparisons, or ratios between different social groups, both Mohanty and Spivak put a major emphasis of their considerations on addressing the interpersonal relationship between members of such groups. Doing this, they do not refer to such groups as to separate societal units, but rather focus on complex forms of power and interaction between such groups.

3.

Both intersectional and postcolonial feminist theories decidedly address issues of inner-feminist diversity and its implications – presupposing that these matters have to be explicitly named in order for them to be properly addressable in political theory and practice. Intersectional approaches do this in a more static and a more localized fashion – whereas postcolonial positions tend to be more historical and more global. Furthermore, some of the current intersectional research goes along with quantitative social science methodology – whereas postcolonial feminist theory might best be described as critical thought. But despite these differences, I would be hesitant to posit these two schools of scholarship as mutually excluding; and rather ask in which ways they can challenge and supplement each other. Three aspects come to mind.

First, it is noteworthy that intersectionality research has reached the political science mainstream – whereas postcolonial theories so far remain rather at the margins of this discipline.⁸ The reasons for this difference might be random, but they might also be connected to methodology. Intersectional accounts seem to be assimilable into mainstream ways of doing (feminist) research, whereas postcolonial feminist theories rather question such ways,

⁸ For an attempt at mainstreaming intersectionality by that exact name see Kaur Dhamoon (2011).

ask questions about what such research does, how it does it and what it leaves out – and what the representational effects of such choices might be. In this sense, postcolonial feminist theories may be seen as a constant corrective of mainstream ways of representing diversity within feminist scholarship.

Second, not all intersectionality scholarship is empirical – the work of Iris Marion Young is a case in point. And it is obvious that there is ground where she and Spivak meet. For both authors critically address how hierarchizing social norms, differentiations and representations are being produced and reproduced – and how this happens even within liberal and other well-intentioned forms of discourse. In fact, both Young and Spivak illustrate their respective criticism by referring to the othering of sexism and to attempts at liberating the victims of such sexism – typically by actors who are otherwise not necessarily known for their feminist convictions. This constellation, of course, is an intersectional case par excellence.

Finally, out of the four authors that I have discussed, it is postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty who explicitly refers to the intersection of various forms of struggle – in her case, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, gay and lesbian as well as feminist struggle. Thereby, she decidedly broadens the categorical focus of much intersectionality research to include intersectional issues of political activism – and thereby issues that cannot be properly addressed without recourse to considerations about activists' interaction across boundaries of difference. Such interaction might profit greatly from knowledge gained by empirical intersectionality scholarship. But such knowledge alone is unlikely to suffice.

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