

Reflections on the Intersectionality Wars

BY MORGAN C. MATTHEWS

Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Duke University Press, 2019. 182 pp. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$23.95, ISBN 978-1478000594.

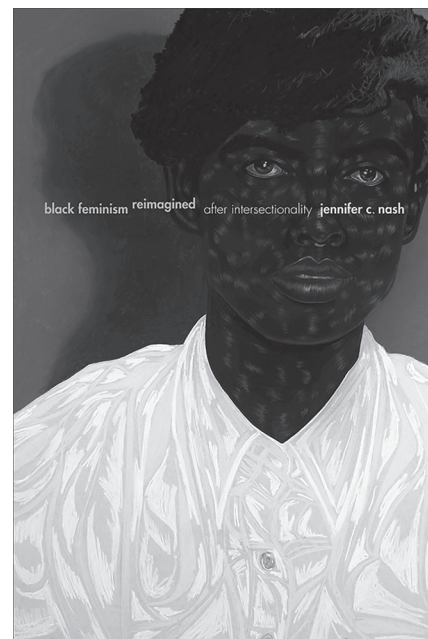
Intersectionality is widely regarded as women's studies' most important theoretical contribution.¹ As disciplines like women's studies lay claim to intersectionality — a product of black women's labor — academic battles have escalated into wars. The stakes of these conflicts have been described as the “occultic commodification”² of intersectionality as it travels from the margins to the mainstream. What is the fate of critics on the frontlines of the intersectionality wars? And what lies ahead in intersectionality's future? In *Black Feminism Reimagined*, Jennifer C. Nash draws on a combination of discourse analysis, affect theory, and personal reflection to address these complex questions.

Writing as one of intersectionality's “critics,” Nash argues that understanding the history of intersectionality's academic institutionalization is key to comprehending these emotion-ridden battles. Nash makes two critical observations about intersectionality's “institutional life” (p. 11) in universities. First, black feminist theory (the countless contributions of which have often been reduced to intersectionality alone) is deployed as a disciplinarian of white feminism in women's studies. Second, in reforming women's studies, it has become a program-building initiative for legitimizing marginalized programs and departments. Intersectionality increasingly stands for added value in contemporary universities. Univer-

sity administrators use the term rhetorically in mission statements and strategic plans to signal an ethic of “diversity and inclusion.” The idea of intersectionality, in short, has been stretched beyond the realms of the social movement activism and critical intellectual traditions from which it originated.

What has come of this process of institutionalization? According to Nash, the appropriation of intersectionality in the academy has produced feelings of defensiveness. In Chapter 1 (“A Love Letter from a Critic”), Nash unpacks how intersectionality's critics are constructed by its protectors as monolithic malcontents. As a result, intersectionality is cast as vulnerable, and the work of defending it as virtuous. The ammunition of black feminist defensiveness is the practice of textual fidelity, or what Nash calls “intersectional originalism” (p. 61). In Chapter 2 (“The Politics of Reading”), Nash shows how originalism is a methodological and political tool for protecting black feminists' proprietary claim on intersectionality.

Black feminist defensiveness is an intelligible affective response to the concept's institutionalization. Yet, Nash contends, “[Defensiveness] is a dangerous form of agency, one that traps black feminism, and black feminists, rather than liberating us” (p. 27). Intersectional turf wars have made black women intersectionality's sole actor to the exclusion of



non-black women of color. Intersectionality's warriors have reread its foundational texts to have one true meaning rather than multiple meanings. This protective stance has conscripted black feminists into intersectionality wars that ultimately hold back the transformative potential of black feminism.

The current political moment, which is riddled with racism, homophobia, and populist xenophobia, begs for the attention and labor of critical scholars. So what would an intersectionality disentangled from the wars that preoccupy its protectors look like?

Nash envisions a deterritorialized intersectionality that is inclusive of people beyond black women. Achieving an expansive intersectionality requires laying down arms in the intersectionality wars and surrendering the proprietary claim of black women on this knowledge project. In turn, Nash argues, letting go opens up "new intimacies between bodies of thought, and material bodies, that are so often kept separate in women's studies" (p. 110).

Black Feminism Reimagined contributes to ongoing debates about the meaning of intersectionality and its ability to travel across disciplines.³

The book, like intersectionality itself, has multiple uses. For a broad audience, including undergraduate classes, Nash's analysis of intersectionality's multiple intellectual and institutional histories in the introductory chapter provides a concise overview of intersectional debates. Scholars and practitioners of intersectionality will find Nash's nuanced reflections on the institutional basis for the intersectionality wars to be insightful and thought-provoking. Finally, as a theory-(re)building work, *Black Feminism Reimagined* makes a strong case for a more inclusive intersectionality.

Notes

1. Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, v. 30, no. 3 (Spring 2005), pp. 1771-1800.
2. Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, "Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era," *Feminist Formations*, v. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 1-25.
3. See, for example, Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

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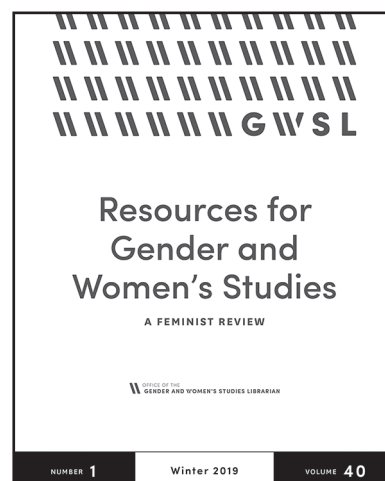
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