Intersections, Social Change, and "Engaged" Theories: Implications of North American Feminism[1)]

Ann Garry

Summary

The concept of "intersectionality" has been developed as part of a strategy that North American social theorists use to navigate the theoretical, political, and moral difficulties that arise as they advocate social justice in a highly diverse society. An intersectional analysis recognizes that different kinds of oppressions are connected and work through each other. For example, a white racist might use sexist stereotypes of Asian women to try to subordinate them by race. Using North American feminist theory as an example, I argue that although there have been recent critiques of the concept of intersectionality, its advantages far outweigh its disadvantages. I respond to criticisms of intersectionality and link it with Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances to provide a basis for analyzing the similarities and differences among people sharing an "identity." Finally, I suggest that social theorists in a variety of disciplines and projects will be well served if they use intersectional analyses as they create theories that support social change.

In the last few decades academics who produce "engaged" theory—theory intended to support social change directly or indirectly—have struggled with a wide range of theoretical, political, and moral implications of the complex differences in human lives and cultures. Struggles have taken place on various levels, from the most abstract debates between postmodernists and more traditional normative theorists to very concrete controversies over racist or sexist behavior among members of activist groups. In order to navigate their differences, the theorists I know best—North American feminists, critical race theorists and queer theorists—have spent a great deal of time considering the connections among race/ethnicity/gender/sexual orientation (and to a lesser degree, but usually mentioned on the list, social class and disabilities, and less often mentioned, religion, age, and nationality). Although such theorists now recognize

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that it is crucial to think in terms of transnational and global contexts, the origins of their discussions of differences and connections come from specific historical contexts in North America. In particular, they stem from the concrete ways in which feminism and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activist movements have evolved and from legal and political responses to the United States' history of racism.

One of the strategies that North American engaged theorists have devised to deal with differences and connections uses the concept of "intersectionality." Broadly speaking, intersectional analyses hold that oppressions by race, ethnicity, gender, and class, etc. do not act independently of each other in our lives; instead, each is shaped by and works through the others. I will explain some of the controversies over intersectionality as they have played out in North American feminist theory. I hope that attention to the controversies themselves as well as the strategy for which I argue can be of use in other cultures and by other communities of engaged theorists.

Why Is Intersectionality Needed?

Let's turn to the specific origin of the concept of intersectionality. As suggested above, the need for such a concept grows out of the difficulty North Americans have had, both theoretically and practically, in considering the impact of and relations among race, gender, sexual orientation and class in our lives and work. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the idea of intersectionality in the late 1980s to most feminists and critical race theorists. Crenshaw, a law professor, saw that "single-axis" legal analyses—the ability to use either race or gender, but not both, as simultaneous standards of discrimination—were working to the serious detriment of African-American women. As the court pleased, African-American women were either not allowed to count as women or not allowed to count as Black. The injustices they suffered were often invisible. Crenshaw's remedy for the judicial inability to deal with compounded discrimination was the concept of intersectionality.[2] Her original concept was narrow: it included only race and gender and only discrimination or oppression rather than privilege.

In other essays Crenshaw applied intersectionality to nonlegal contexts in order to explain the ways in which members of a "group" can have both shared and divergent interests. She uses examples of different ways in which domestic violence affects African-American women and men in cities such as Los Angeles or New York.[3] While both men and women have been involved in community support against police mistreatment of African-American men who are batterers, this support sometimes has

[2] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67. The cases concerned compounded discrimination in seniority-based layoffs, promotions, and awards of back pay.

[3] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99.

an extremely negative impact on African-American women whom they batter. An intersectional analysis recognizes that we need not wait for the racism of police to end in order to deal with violence against Black women. Thus it is better to understand that one's interests coincide with other group members only to a point because of the other facets of oneself that are not shared by everyone in the group; group-identity-based commonality is only partial.

Intersectionality caught on very quickly among North American feminist theorists and is today their most widely accepted way of thinking about multiple facets of oppression and experience. However, it is still very controversial. Recently some feminists of color have rejected it. I will argue for retaining it. Before turning to this argument, I need to explain current more inclusive uses of intersectionality.

First of all, people moved very quickly beyond the intersection of race and gender to include other facets of our identities, though still in the arena of multiple *oppressions*. The oppression experienced by a Latina lesbian will not be separable into isolated "womanness," "lesbianness," and "Latinoness." All facets influence the other facets (and remember that I've left out many other facets, for example, class, religion, and possible disabilities). Carla Trujillo gives examples from the Mexican-American community. Mexican-American lesbians are not only seen as going to hell as Catholics, but also as betraying their people, "*la raza*," by "acting white" (that is, simply by being lesbians).[4] In this community there is shame connected with and silence about women's bodies that apply to both lesbian and straight women that makes it hard to love women's bodies—their own or anyone else's.

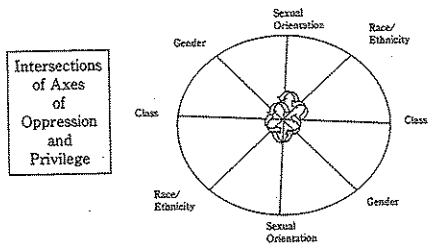
Because this kind of analysis resonated with so many people, it is often used today to incorporate "axes" of privilege as well as of oppression and to focus on the ways in which experiences are shaped differently. Thus the Latina lesbian from a wealthy family will be influenced (and might well be protected to some degree) by the privilege that flows from that wealth. One central point that follows from the wider use is that intersectionality requires that no woman's experience is seen as "woman's" simpliciter. There is no space to take one race, class or sexual orientation of women as a paradigm experience from which others deviate. This is part of what María Lugones means in her call for feminist theory to be pluralistic from the start.[5] Women's interests and experiences will be shared in some respects and not in others. Obviously a comparable point would apply to "racial or ethnic experience": racial experiences are gendered.

Regardless of specific nuances of different concepts of intersectionality a few key points are present: (1) members of a "group" have both similarities and differences

[4] Carla M. Trujillo, "Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community," in *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, ed. Carla M. Trujillo (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1991), 186–94.

[5] María Lugones "The Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 65–75.

that result from certain kinds of social oppression or privilege, and (2) any individual's experiences are shaped by factors working in conjunction with and through each other, not in an isolated fashion. Readers who like diagrams can consider the one below. It represents the widest meaning of intersectionality—privilege as well as oppression—and can be read in at least two ways: the first reading sees a person at intersections of various axes of oppression and privilege working through each other; the second reading centers an issue such as sexual violence and represents the ways in which various axes intersect in that issue. Of course, no number of arrows showing relations among axes can do justice to real life complexities. It is only a diagram!



Advantages and Disadvantages of an Intersectional Analysis

In considering the advantages and disadvantages of an intersectional analysis, it is important to think not only about theories but also about the political and moral issues involved in social movements. In the case of feminism there have always been controversies among us—along the lines of sexual orientation, racial/ethnic groups, social classes, and nationalities, as well as different theoretical commitments. Such controversies have contested story lines, but encompass both feminist theory and activism and the personal relations among members of groups. Intersectionality seemed to be a fine start for dealing with these issues. And on the theory front, "essentialism" has been criticized heavily for quite some time.[6] Yet at the same time that feminists do not want to "essentialize," we want enough "substance" to the concept of women (or gender) for it to be useful as an analytical and political tool.

[6] "Essentialism" is interpreted in many different ways across various disciplines. For the purposes of this essay, an essentialist would hold one of two positions: (a) that there is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept such as woman, or (b) that there is a set of experiences that women universally share. Readers will notice that I do not address sweeping "postmodern" attacks on identity concepts here. I assume that identity categories such as woman and gender have useful functions even if they are problematic. An intersectional analysis is a more straightforward approach to their use than is, for example, Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism." See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

Intersectionality, here, too, seemed to be sent from the goddesses to rescue us. Of course, it is never that simple.

The advantages are both theoretical and practical.

Let's start with the *practical* ones.

- Intersectionality helps us to articulate the ways in which facets of our lives have gone unnoticed by other members of our "group." This enables us to explain the ways in which (and reasons why) we share and do not share common political aims with each other. Understanding the reasons is especially helpful for making our communication, especially our disagreements, respectful and productive. If we have serious differences we need to face them fairly and not try to put on a forced face of alliance and solidarity. Let's look at a few examples.
    - Feminists have long disagreed over the institution of marriage, but this has taken a new turn since the issue of same-sex marriage came to wider public consciousness in a number of countries. Straight and gay people who are otherwise aligned in their ideas or their identities sometimes differ heatedly about it. For example, lesbian and heterosexual feminists agree that it is extremely insulting to the dignity and personhood of gay people not to have the same kinds of possibilities of public recognition of gay relationships that straight people have. However, at the same time, the straight feminists who have offered the most serious critiques of marriage have pleaded with lesbian feminists not to move same-sex marriage up the list of priorities of gay issues, but stay with the more radical critiques of marriage. Some have done so, others have joined in an effort to offer wider proposals "beyond same-sex marriage."[7] However, lesbian and straight women's interests might just differ here. A lesbian is in a far more tenuous position—she simply does not have the same kind of privilege to reject getting married that a straight woman has. Her priority might well lie with increasing the value of gay relationships in the eyes of the whole community (or it might not). But whatever her position, the different facets of her experience shape each other. And women's understanding of these differences will help them understand why women different from themselves might disagree over concrete issues and priorities.
    - Crenshaw offers an example concerning misogynist lyrics by hiphop artists. Both Black men and Black women have an interest in free speech, want to support cultural expression from their community, and oppose selective prosecution of Black musicians. However, Black women's interests diverge

[7] For example, see Katherine Acey et al., "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage," July 26, 2006, http://www.beyondmarriage.org/BeyondMarriage.pdf (accessed September 18, 2007).

from those of Black male hiphop artists whose misogynist lyrics reduce their sisters to extremely negative stereotypes. Crenshaw makes a compelling case for the need to oppose both misogyny and racism in order to stop the marginalization of Black women.[8]

- A third interesting case concerns the history of HIV education and prevention in Los Angeles Latino and African-American communities. Men and women of each group agreed on the need for increased HIV education and prevention work in their communities (and, of course, share much common oppression). Nevertheless there are some community norms that severely harm some of the women of the groups. Each group has a sexual norm for men in their group that allows men to have sex with other men from time to time without considering themselves homosexual or bisexual (for Black men it is being on the "down low"; for Latino men, male-male sexual activities do not count as homosexual unless a man is the passive male partner). Thus neither group of men identified with or was seen as the target population of HIV education and prevention work; they were being bypassed by it for a number of years. Meanwhile their female partners were contracting HIV.

- The fact that there is no woman simpliciter has both practical and theoretical advantages. (Note that this advantage requires the broader interpretation of intersectionality that includes privilege as well as oppression.) Women in the dominant cultural group have to consider their other facets, too, when they think about their experiences as women or make theoretical claims or advocate practical strategies about social change. This is particularly important in either a national or transnational context in which there is a significant imbalance of power among different groups of women. The specific advantages are:
  - Women from the dominant group are not as likely to overgeneralize.
  - Because all women have the same need to attend to their own various "facets" as well as to those of other women it should stop the tendency to identify intersectionality with "multi-cultural feminism." It is particularly important to me as a white North American to stop this identification because restricting intersectionality to multiply-subordinated groups of women still leaves women of color with a lesser place at the feminist conversation table—deviating from the "standard" white woman. It is important to understand that everyone's experiences are shaped race/gender/class/sexual orientation, and so on. This lays the groundwork for

[8] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," *Boston Review* 6 (December 1991): 6–33.

very rich analyses of women's lives and experiences and enables a response to some critics of intersectionality that I will discuss later.

- Moving now to theoretically oriented advantages:
  - It gives a positive way to deal with essentialism and anti-essentialism. For quite a while now in many disciplines it has been unacceptable (or at least uncool) to be an "essentialist." What anti-essentialists want to claim is often one of two positions: you can't make the assumption that all members of a social group have the same experience or that they have the same characteristics. The "essence" of woman, or of man, or of a nationality, or of humankind just doesn't exist. Different members have different characteristics and different experiences. I will return to this topic after I have discussed worries about and difficulties with intersectionality.
  - It contributes to a plausible explanation for the ways in which multiple systems of oppression work. Cheshire Calhoun, a philosopher who identifies as both a feminist and a lesbian, argues that ending sexism will not end heterosexism.[9] Whatever one's ultimate conclusion on this issue, an intersectional analysis can clarify the similarities and differences between the straightjackets that traditional gender roles have placed on us—either as gay/straight men or women.

- ***The worries and difficulties*** that arise are both practical and theoretical. For example, theoretically . . .
  - It proliferates "genders" because each ethnic group will have a different one.
  - It will lead to too much fragmentation: everyone will be producing theories only for their very small group—or worse—only as individuals speaking for themselves.
  - The very worst stage of fragmentation is that we won't be able to have any feminist theories at all because there is no recognizable concept of woman.
  - Even if we can retain a concept of woman, it gives women no priority—as feminist theory should. If feminists don't, who will?

  Practically . . .
  - It leads to lack of empathy and does not fit well with positions of solidarity among women.
  - Affirmative action and other advances for women of color will suffer, and, in general, women interests will suffer without a common essence.

  These are serious worries. Most of them have been articulated well by Naomi

[9] Cheshire Calhoun, "Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory," *Ethics*. 104 (April 1994): 558–81.

Zack.[10] If they can not be answered we might need to develop an alternative to intersectionality that recognizes its core insights but does not have the negative implications. I will argue that they can be answered in a way that preserves common empathy and advances for women and prevents a slide down the slippery slope of theory proliferation. In the course of developing this argument I will answer the objections noted above, although not in the order stated.

An Alternative to Intersectionality That Tries to Retain Its Core Insights

I take the core insights of intersectionality to be the ones I mentioned earlier: (1) that members of a "group" have both similarities and differences that are likely to result from certain kinds of social privilege or oppression, and (2) that any individual's experiences are shaped by factors working in conjunction with and through each other, not in an isolated fashion. Can these insights be captured by a more "universal" approach that will retain the analytical force of having a concept "woman" with shared features and that will not lead to fragmentation and division or derail social change?

Recently two feminist philosophers who are U.S. women of color have offered theories that aim to be more universal—trying to capture the "essence" of women at the same time they leave room for many differences. Linda Martín Alcoff speaks in terms of the metaphysics of sex and gender rather than using the word 'essence' nevertheless, she aims to explain what women have in common.[11] Naomi Zack explicitly attacks intersectional analyses and argues for an essence of women. I will discuss Zack's position because of her direct and sustained attack on intersectionality.

Zack's goal is to put forth an inclusive feminism suitable for "universal advocacy for women's interests."[12] She believes that to do this she needs a "universal normative analysis" of women, specifically that women have an essence that can be articulated in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman rather than a man. Her most concise statement of the essence of women is below.

> All women share the nonsubstantive, relational essence of being assigned to or identifying with the historical, socially constructed, disjunctive category of female birth designees, biological mothers, or heterosexual choices of men—category FMP.* Category FMP captures what women have in common as the imagined but real group that is the logical contrary of the group of men, in human male-female, man-women gender systems.[13]
>
> *F=designated female at birth; M=biological mother; P=primary sexual choice of [heterosexual] men.[14]

[10] Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

[11] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[12] Zack, 1.

I believe that even if Zack's disjunction "assigned to or identifying with F or M or P" might literally capture the individuals we would include in women, they do not give us an "essence" of the sort she finds necessary.

Zack takes quite literally that intersectionality implies that women of different ethnic groups (and presumably sexual orientations) have different genders. The best known advocates of intersectionality do not state this, though it can be found in Elizabeth Spelman's similar position in *Inessential Woman*.[15] However, I want to argue that intersectionality need not multiply genders for each different ethnicity/race or social class; indeed, an intersectional analysis does not make sense if it does so. After all, gender, class, and race/ethnicity must intersect. The individual axes must have at least a minimal degree of stable meaning for the analysis to work. If every intersection produced a new gender or a new race (or both!), there would be no way to make sense of the ways in which ethnicity affects one's gendered experience. As we noted earlier, those who favor intersectionality tend to favor it because it illuminates the wide varieties of women's experiences across other axes of oppression and enables them to find suitable remedies for multiple oppressions. The "gender axis" needs to be intelligible across other axes or there is nothing to appeal to in the explanation or remedy. Thus, not only does intersectionality fail to entail a proliferation of genders, its proponents should fight strongly against such a move in order for an intersectional analysis to retain its power of explanation.

Although I am critical of Zack's approach, I want to emphasize that her analysis is designed to treat the usual problems with commonalities and differences that feminist theorists have: how to deal with racism/heterosexism among feminists, the diversity of women's experiences, and the need for a ground to attack a view that women's essence is biological. First, although it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss it, her book is clearly motivated by her desire to prevent negative consequences by race. Second, her double-layered disjunction, "assigned to or identifying with F or M or P," is designed to deal with diversity among women and their experiences as well as to deny that biology is a sole determinant of women. Since Zack wants to end racism and to accommodate both the socially constructed character of women and their variety of experiences, there is much agreement between Zack and advocates of intersectionality, including me. But methods and metaphysics matter a great deal to

[13] Zack, 162.

[14] Zack, 8.

[15] Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

Zack (in fact, I believe that she places too much faith in the influence that metaphysics has on people's beliefs). My suspicion is that many of Zack's opponents would at best find her "nonsubstantive, relational" essence to be of little use, either practically or philosophically, even if they appreciate the motives from which she offers it. I find it to be very misleading as metaphysics and not very helpful as feminist theory or as a political stance.

An Alternative to Zack

Is there not a simpler way than Zack's to deal with diversity among women and the other issues that concern her? Yes: it cries out for analysis using Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances (sometimes called "cluster concepts" by other philosophers). Wittgenstein urges us not to look for essences where they are not to be found, but instead counsels us to look and see what the connections are among things we designate by the same word. I will argue that a family resemblance approach is compatible with an intersectional analysis and that the combination of these approaches offers the best strategy for navigating differences, similarities, and the need for analytically sound concepts.

Substitute "woman" for "number" in this familiar passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations:*

> And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread [my italics] does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions – namely the disjunction of all their common properties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres."[16]

A family resemblance analysis of woman will accommodate much more simply everything that Zack incorporates into her disjunctive "essence" of woman—except, of course, her metaphysics. She wants to call it an essence; Wittgenstein (and I) would want to replace essences with family resemblances to account for the common concept. Let's run through it quickly. Women differ at the same time they have similarities;

[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), § 67. He uses the term "family resemblance" to evoke the wide variety of kinds of resemblances among family members: those who share coloring might not have similar chins or noses; others share only a chin; still others share temperament but no physical features. In the preceding section Wittgenstein illustrates his position about family resemblances by using the example of games (§ 66). We can not give a set of properties that are necessary and sufficient for something's being a game, but game is still an important and useful concept with clear applications.

however, the similarities between some women will not be the same as those between others. This is why Zack starts with a disjunction, "F or M or P," then adds a further disjunctive layer on top of it—"assigned to or identifies with F or M or P." Consider some examples. One of the factors that has traditionally been used most forcefully to categorize human beings as women is being a mother or at least having the capacity for motherhood. Most women have similar sets of reproductive capacities and physical features. But those who don't have these capacities/features will have something else in common with the first group of women. They very likely think of themselves and identify publicly and subjectively as women and are treated as women by others. Similarly, even if heterosexuality plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of "women" as we know them, lesbians are still women because of other characteristics that they share with other women—physical, subjective, social, and so forth. Transwomen are women because they "identify with" people with a characteristic F or M or P. Both Zack's analysis and Wittgenstein's can accommodate all of these kinds of cases. Wittgenstein's concept is less rigid than Zack's in the kinds of connections it allows, but both approaches are very inclusive.[17]

The next step is to determine whether a family resemblance analysis can adequately distinguish women from men. It can. Women need not have an essence, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, in order for us to mark off a group of women. Characteristics that are in the range of family resemblances will mark off a group in context. To do so, we ask the purpose for which we are trying to find boundaries for the group. If a feminist is arguing for equal pay for women or comparable pay for "women's jobs" she need not care about chromosomes or androgen levels. On the other hand, if a clinical drug trial measures different responses of men and women to a new cholesterol-lowering drug, then hormones and other physical factors matter more than social roles. Even if a critic of a Wittgensteinian approach finds far too much reliance on "purposes" here, this approach works at least as well as Zack's in any case. Zack, after all, would need to choose which of her disjuncts is most important for a particular context or purpose in her quest to advance women. If she is working for women's equal access to education or employment it is irrelevant whether someone is the primary sexual choice of heterosexual men.

The point of focusing on the ability to draw category boundaries is not simply to distinguish men from women, but also because feminists need at least minimally stable analytical categories such as woman and gender in order to block the slide down a

[17] Although Zack's concept is inclusive, I still have a few problems with it. For example, although it was designed in part to take into account transgendered people, it has strange consequences for them. How can someone designated female at birth (characteristic F) cease to be a woman on Zack's analysis? It takes only one disjunct to make someone count as a woman: transmen, even after becoming men, would continue to satisfy the "F" disjunct of Zack's analysis of woman. So then how can her analysis account for a transman's leaving the category woman to become a man?

slippery slope of increasingly fragmented analyses and multiplication of genders. Both Zack and a family resemblance analysis can block this slide. A family resemblance analysis goes beyond merely marking off the category of woman; it can also incorporate an intersectional analysis as part of it. In so doing, it can satisfy more of feminists' needs than can Zack's approach. When intersectionality is backed up by a family resemblance analysis of the concept of woman, the richness of women's differences can be accommodated without a temptation to create a new gender for any new racial/ethnic group or sexual orientation.

To sum up, I prefer Wittgenstein to Zack not only because her philosophical analysis is arcane and filled with strange metaphysics, but more importantly because feminist theorists need to be able to incorporate the core insights of the intersectional approach in a way that does not fall prey either to the slippery slope of fragmentation or to the inability to do theory at all. A family resemblance analysis serves us far more usefully than Zack's analysis does. It lets us take into account intersectional differences but retain woman and gender as theoretical categories. It is foolish to think that useful categories must have necessary and sufficient conditions for their application.

Implications of Intersectional Feminism

The final objection to an intersectional analysis is that it does not prioritize women and sexism as feminists should. This is a serious objection, for if feminists do not prioritize women and their interests, who will? It is certainly true that an intersectional analysis complicates feminism. We can not simply focus on patriarchy and sexism, but must also consider how racism, heterosexism, and other axes of oppression work through sexism and vice-versa. However, instead of thinking that this takes away from a focus on women, we should realize that we are not acting in the interest of women if we do not understand the ways in which other axes of oppression and corresponding kinds of privilege shape women's lives: they interact with and work through sexism. Intellectual and political work are both made more difficult by this complexity, but complexity can not responsibly be avoided. Since human beings' lives are not simple, neither will feminist theory nor feminist practice be.

The implications I see for other engaged theorists are by now obvious. My vision for good engaged theory is that regardless of someone's primary theoretical focus, for example, imperialism, racism, nationalism, or heterosexism, it is crucial both for good theory and for plausible strategies of social change that one attend to the other axes of oppression and privilege that intersect with one's primary focus.[18] In addition, we all need to be aware that the salient axes in the intersection might well differ from culture to culture. For example, nationality is much more important in Japan than it is in Canada. Social class and race both mean different things in different countries. In order to gain cultural knowledge and to understand better the variety of oppressions we must read at least some of each other's work and listen to each other carefully.

Of course, it is easier to recommend this than to engage in it. Even engaged theorists with the best intentions have only twenty-four hours each day. In addition, people of good will continue to disagree strongly over priorities as well as over the best theories to support change. At any given time an engaged theorist (or activist) must prioritize issues to address—whether the issues are close to home or, increasingly, transnational or global. Referring specifically again to feminists, I think it is important that they roam freely through issues that include tangled multiple oppressions. A feminist might choose to address heterosexist marriage laws in the United States or economic exploitation of men and women in the "global south" as well as more traditional "women's issues" such as rape or forced prostitution of women during war. Any of these can be important feminist subjects if we pay particular attention to women's situation, experiences, and interests in them. But paying special attention to women while analyzing heterosexist marriage laws or class exploitation in the global south as well as rape during war means that one must attend to the ways in which privilege and oppression along other axes bear on the issues. The point of taking multiple axes of oppression into account is not simply to improve our theories, though it will do so. It is to combat racism, classism, and heterosexism as well as sexism in the lives of our fellow human beings. Social justice and morality require us to do so.

[18] Crenshaw and others in the African American Policy Forum are engaged in this work as they advocate intersectional analyses in multinational contexts on a number of continents. Their work is sponsored by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. Information can be found at http://aapf.org/projects/international/.