



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

NEXT WAVE New Directions in Women's Studies

*A series edited by Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Robyn Wiegman*

JENNIFER C. NASH

black feminism **reimagined** after intersectionality

Duke University Press Durham and London 2019

© 2019 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker and typeset in

Whitman and Futura by Graphic Composition, Inc., Bogart, Georgia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nash, Jennifer C., [date] author.

Title: Black feminism reimagined : after intersectionality /  
Jennifer C. Nash.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2019. |

Series: Next wave | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018026166 (print)

LCCN 2018034093 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478002253 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478000433 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9781478000594 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Womanism—United States. | Feminism—  
United States. | Intersectionality (Sociology) | Feminist theory. |  
Women's studies—United States. | Universities and colleges—  
United States—Sociological aspects.

Classification: LCC HQ1197 (ebook) | LCC HQ1197 .N37 2019  
(print) | DDC 305.420973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018026166>

COVER ART: Toyin Ojih Odutola, *The Uncertainty Principle*, 2014. © Toyin Ojih Odutola.  
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

INTRODUCTION. *feeling black feminism* 1

1. a love letter from a critic, or notes  
on the intersectionality wars 33

2. the politics of reading 59

3. surrender 81

4. love in the time of death 111

CODA. *some of us are tired* 133

Notes 139

Bibliography 157

Index 165

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the course of writing this book, I moved to a new city, started a new job, and welcomed a new life into the world. It has been a long season of change—both delightful and disorienting—and in the midst of it, I have considered this project a reassuring constant. The poet Mary Oliver reminds us “Let me / keep my mind on what matters, / which is my work.” Every day that I have met this work, I have been reminded that it matters because it has given me the freedom to ask questions, to explore, to dream, and to be in conversation with scholars whom I respect deeply.

I spent six years as an assistant professor in the American Studies Department and Women’s Studies Program at George Washington University. I am deeply grateful for the friends I made there, particularly Dara Orenstein, Chad Heap, Calvin Warren, Naeemah Raqib (the patron saint of women’s studies), Justin Mann, Kim Probolus, and the many fantastic cohorts of Varieties of Feminist Theory. I owe Emily Hirsch extra thanks for a friendship born from Varieties and sustained through two years of daily WhatsApps from Zambia. Tom Guglielmo is in a category of his own. He welcomed me to DC with tremendous warmth, and over the course of six years, our families became close friends. I am endlessly grateful for his big-heartedness and kindness and his sense of humor. Jim Miller created a departmental culture of generosity, a healthy irreverence for university bureaucracy, and a deep appreciation for March Madness. He is missed. Katie Rademacher Kein is one of my most cherished friends, and I owe her thanks for so much—a deep and always-growing friendship; Seinfeld references; daily e-mails and texts; cookies and waffles.

There isn't a day that has passed when we haven't talked about the smallest and biggest of things in our lives, and I am endlessly grateful for the ongoing conversation. Thanks to my new colleagues in the Department of African American Studies and the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Northwestern who have welcomed me into their community. And thanks, always and deeply, to my students who remind me why I do this work. Special thanks to Mishana Garschi for her careful reading of the final draft of this manuscript, for a friendship that I cherish, and for the shared love of cookies.

I have endless love and appreciation for my homegirls. Emily Owens has given me the joy of sisterhood. I am grateful for morning check-in emails and Skype sessions; for the intellectual pleasures of our many collaborations; for the celebrations we have shared and for the hard moments when we have been in each other's corner; and for all the ways that, for the last fifteen years, we have been witnesses to each other's lives. Samantha Pinto has read this horse more times than I can count, and always with encouragement, generosity, and her characteristic brilliance and insight. I thank her for the extraordinary pleasure of reading, writing, and thinking together; for texts and Skype sessions in the final months of this project that reminded me that there was something here worth saying; for her company, wisdom, and humor in the early years of parenting; and for all the moments she has helped me through existential dread by knowing just how to make me laugh. Amber Musser and I have been thinking together for over a decade—about big ideas and the stuff of everyday life—and this book simply wouldn't exist without her insightful and generous feedback, intellectual companionship, and treasured friendship.

Thank you to a remarkable group of dear friends: Amber Musser, Amy Hesse Siniscalchi, Attiya Ahmad, Emily Hirsch, Emily Owens, Jonathan Evans, Nikki Kadomiya, Katie Rademacher Kein, Peter Geller, Reshma Gardner, Samantha Pinto, Sarah Jane Cervenak, Sylvanna Falcón, and Tom Guglielmo. I appreciate all the lunches, dinners, cookies, teas, Scrabble games, supportive e-mails, and Skype dates.

Thanks to Sylvanna Falcón for long-distance feminist community, writing deadlines, the pleasures of collaborative writing, and many conversations on intersectionality and transnationalism. Thanks to Sarah Jane Cervenak for her deeply smart work, her generous spirit, and her generative feedback on this manuscript.

Thanks to the feminist writing circle for collegiality, smart feedback, and much-needed community: Attiya Ahmad, Libby Anker, Soyica Colbert, Ivy

Ken, Bibiana Obler, Samantha Pinto. Many thanks to Attiya for her generosity in every sense of the word, her pictures and texts from far-flung places, and for being a loving godmother to Naima. Many thanks to Ivy for her kindness and sense of humor, her important work on intersectionality, and for ongoing conversations about mutual constitution (and for that unforgettable phrase: “death watch”).

Thanks to Maria MacKnight, healer extraordinaire, for everything she did to keep my mind and body well. Thanks to Maricela Lloreda Manzano for lovingly caring for Naima from the very beginning, and for becoming part of our family. Thanks to the folks who have nourished Naima’s mind, soul, and body—Kevin, Alma, Deonna, Taji, and especially Maria Pino Duran (my dear friend and *comadre*). This book simply wouldn’t exist without the community they have made.

Thanks to mentors and teachers: Nicole Fleetwood served as my mentor during my fellowship year and gave tirelessly of her time, energy, and insightful feedback. In the many years since, she has consistently supported me and my work. She encouraged me to think about defensiveness in relationship to black feminism and thus set me on the path that birthed this book. She has also modeled for me a relationship to professional life that is rooted in generosity rather than competition, abundance rather than scarcity, joy instead of anxiety. Robyn Wiegman’s work has challenged me in the most exciting ways, transforming the questions that I ask and demanding that I interrogate my attachments to those very questions. I am thankful for the tremendous intellectual generosity she has shown me, the critical questions she has posed at just the right time, and her deep support of my work. Sunday mornings with Ashutosh-ji Agrawal at Hindi University kept me grounded. I admire Ashu’s genuine curiosity about people and ideas, his commitment to spreading his love of Hindi, and his passion for teaching. In the midst of my first Chicago winter, Lindsey Stranc helped me stretch my body and mind, challenging me to do things I didn’t think possible while talking about MOOCs and the Middle East bakery. I am deeply grateful. Paulo Carvalho has introduced me to the joys of the piano and encouraged me to put a “little bit of Aretha” in everything I do.

The Woodrow Wilson Junior Faculty Career Enhancement Grant provided a transformative year of research leave and supportive scholarly community; Northwestern University’s Faculty Research Grant, George Washington University’s Facilitating Fund, and George Washington University’s Columbian College’s Facilitating Fund provided research support; Elizabeth



Novara at the University of Maryland Library helped me access the National Women's Studies Association's archives. Thanks to editors and readers at *Social Text* and *Feminist Theory*; both journals published earlier versions of the work here, and anonymous readers helped me sharpen my arguments. Thanks to Duke University Press, especially Ken Wissoker and Elizabeth Ault, who shepherded this manuscript through the review process with profound care. Duke's review process models the best of academic life: a deep generosity with ideas. I owe endless thanks to the four reviewers whose rigorous, respectful, and thoughtful feedback pushed me forward in crucial directions.

Thanks to interlocutors who gave me space to try out ideas, and who posed exciting questions of this work: at the National Women's Studies Association's annual conference, the American Studies Association's annual conference, University of Massachusetts Amherst (especially Svati Shah), Rice University (especially Susan Lurie), Washington University (especially Amber Musser), Duke University's Feminist Theory Workshop (especially Robyn Wiegman), Ohio State University (especially Shannon Winnubst), the University of Michigan's Women's Studies Department (especially Joey Gamble) and American Culture Department (especially Stephen Molldrem), the University of California San Diego's Ethnic Studies Department, University of Pittsburgh, the University of Toronto's Critical Analysis of Law Workshop, UCLA's Critical Race Studies symposium, and Barnard College's Scholar and Feminist Conference (especially Attiya Ahmad).

Finally, I reserve these closing words for my family:

I stand on the shoulders of dear family members who labored so that I could have a life pursuing what I love. It is an honor to say their names here: Mae Thompson, Alfred Nash, Parthenia Nash, Christine Eastmond, Maurice Eastmond.

Amar Ahmad and I have had a very long journey to what has become a real and treasured friendship. Because our affection is hard-earned, it is all the more precious to me. I hope he knows that I consider it an immense gift to be his stepmother.

Naima Ahmad Nash has been a loving guide to this next chapter in my life. I owe her thanks for her patience with all I don't yet know, her sense of humor, and her deep curiosity and playfulness. She has taught me to enjoy birdies, bunnies, and doggies, to take time to stare with wonder at a plane or a shadow, and to appreciate the rumble of a trash truck. It has been an

immense pleasure to see the world's ordinary magic through her eyes, and I am endlessly grateful for her beautiful presence in my life.

My parents, Carolyn and Douglas Nash, have made endless sacrifices so that I can thrive. My mother always makes time to say "I'm so proud of you," and my father has transformed the basement into the official Jennifer Nash archive (it is not surprising that this archive has yet to have any visitors except, of course, for my father). They find a way to communicate their love and affection, generosity and kindness, every single day. Thank you is far too small since they have given me the world, but it's what I can offer here. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for everything.

Amin Ahmad has done it all and then some. He supports me, cherishes my intellectual life, finds humor in my quirks, unleashes my silliness, and loves me fiercely. He inspires me every day with his commitment to making something beautiful with words, and with his pursuit of a creative life. He has traveled with me—often literally—to unfamiliar places to support my dreams, my work, and our visions of a different life, and he has done it with grace and generosity.

This project, like the one before, like the ones that will come after, is for Amin. It marks all that we have shared, and all that we share. It marks a love that grows with the years, the months, the days. It marks my unending gratitude for him, for the universe that allowed us to find each other, and for our love.

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.’”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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



Beal, recent black feminist scholarship has centered Anna Julia Cooper's work as foundational to modern intersectionality theory. In many ways, Vivian May's scholarship ushered in a deep feminist investment in Cooper's work as a kind of intersectional praxis, one that has been taken up by other scholars like Brittney Cooper, who has advocated for Anna Julia Cooper's place in a genealogy of "race women," of black female intellectuals.<sup>18</sup> For May, centering Anna Julia Cooper is not only a crucial corrective to feminist historiographies that treat intersectionality as a "recent form" of feminist engagement but also a project of feminist education that makes visible the long intellectual and political labor of black women.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, May reads Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) as "the first book-length example of black feminist theory in the US" that "tackles the racialized, gendered, and classed meanings of personhood and citizenship," and thus as an early articulation of intersectionality theory.<sup>20</sup> As May indicates, "Repeatedly, I have found that an inadequate understanding of intersectionality, even in its contemporary iterations, means that Cooper's innovative ideas and complex analyses are widely misunderstood. While Cooper articulates how race, gender, class, and region (and later, nation) interdepend and cannot be examined as isolated, many of her contemporaries and later scholars examining her work could not seem to fully grasp her arguments—in large part because Cooper's words and ideas were examined via single-axis frameworks, either/or models of thought, or measures of rationality that could not account for multiplicity."<sup>21</sup> May's work, then, is an important corrective that underscores the long roots of intersectional thinking in black feminist thought.

The Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement has also become a touchstone for black feminist engagement with intersectionality's histories. (Indeed, the celebrated fortieth anniversary of the collective brought a renewed scholarly and popular interest in centering Combahee as an—or perhaps *the*—inaugural intersectional text.) Combahee began its manifesto by noting, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."<sup>22</sup> While Combahee practiced a black feminist politics rooted in a "healthy love" of black women, its manifesto offered a theory of power that was committed to understanding how sexism, homophobia, racism, and capitalism "are interlocking." As Combahee argued, eradicating sexism would require the deconstruction of other

structures of domination. Writing a decade later, from a perspective rooted in critical historiography, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham also underscored the “interlocking” nature of structures of domination. Higginbotham’s work on the “metalanguage of race” sought to consider how gender, class, and sexuality are raced categories. She writes, “Race not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, gender and class become racial categories that are given meaning through processes of racial domination. While Higginbotham’s intervention is animated by a plea for historians to think differently about structures of domination and their constitution, it is also a call to fundamentally reimagine the very categories that form the basis of scholarly inquiry and political activism.

Other black feminist scholars of the same period were also developing theoretical frameworks that highlighted the mutually constitutive nature of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In 1969, Frances Beal developed the concept of “double jeopardy” to capture how race and gender collude to constrain the lives of black women. For Beal, double jeopardy describes how race and gender compound each other, making black women’s particular experiences qualitatively different from those of both white women and black men, an experience marked by “double discrimination.” Beal writes, “As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men.”<sup>24</sup> Beal’s crucial work produced the concept of “jeopardy” to treat gender and race as structures of domination that inflict violence on black women, and that collaborate to inflict that violence in particularly severe ways. In 1988, Deborah King built on Beal’s work by developing the idea of multiple jeopardy to capture how “the dual and systematic discrimination of racism and sexism remain pervasive, and, for many, class inequality compounds these oppressions.”<sup>25</sup> King sought to trouble the (potential) reading of “double jeopardy” as an additive model, one which suggested that race and gender simply compounded each other to produce a kind of double discrimination. For King, jeopardy is interactive and thus describes the dynamic interplay among structures of domination. King writes, “The modifier ‘multiple’ refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism.”<sup>26</sup> Beal’s and King’s respective engagements with

“jeopardy” as a keyword in theorizing black women’s subjectivities reveal a long-standing black feminist debate over how exactly race and gender interact, how to adequately capture the places where these structures of domination touch.

Though scholars debate intersectionality’s origins, the term is often citationally and genealogically tethered to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s two articles “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991). As Brittney Cooper notes, “Taken together, Crenshaw’s essays catalyzed a tectonic shift in the nature of feminist theorizing by suggesting that black women’s experiences demanded new paradigms in feminist theorizing, creating an analytic framework that exposed through use of a powerful metaphor exactly what it meant for systems of power to be interactive, and explicitly typing the political aims of an inclusive democracy to a theory and account of power.”<sup>27</sup> For Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analytic fundamentally rooted in black women’s experiences, and it constitutes a theoretical, political, and doctrinal effort to do justice to the forms of violence that operate in raced and gendered ways in black women’s lives. She writes, “I will center Black women in this analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences. Not only will this juxtaposition reveal how Black women are theoretically erased, it will also illustrate how this framework imports its own theoretical limitations that undermine efforts to broaden feminist and antiracist analyses.”<sup>28</sup> In “Demarginalizing,” Crenshaw deployed the metaphor of intersectionality to describe the juridical invisibility of black women’s experiences of discrimination, experiences that can be—though are not always—constituted by the interplay of race and gender.<sup>29</sup> In response to a set of legal decisions that obscured or wholly neglected black women’s experiences of discrimination, Crenshaw offered the metaphor of the intersection: “Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.”<sup>30</sup> Law’s race-or-gender structure necessarily renders

experiences “in the intersection” invisible, essentially telling those harmed by an accident—black women—either that no harm was done or that the harm that was inflicted cannot be remedied. In Crenshaw’s hands, intersectionality is a way of responding to doctrinal invisibility with an insistence that law both recognize and redress black women’s particular experiences.

While Crenshaw’s intersection metaphor has circulated as a way of explicating the analytic’s critical aspirations, Anna Carastathis’s recent work calls attention to the second metaphor of “Demarginalizing,” one where Crenshaw also elaborated intersectionality’s theoretical and political urgency. Crenshaw writes:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that “but for” the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch.<sup>31</sup>

This second spatial metaphor calls attention to the limits of the juridical. Here, Crenshaw reveals that conventional conceptions of discrimination that rely on a “but for” logic always leave black women in the proverbial basement, with their experiences of harm unaddressed. In this account, intersectionality shows that antidiscrimination law is itself a technology of discrimination, rather than an actual form of redress, a location that reproduces the violence it is supposed to upend.

While Crenshaw is citationally linked to intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins is also tethered to the intellectual and political labor of intersectionality theory, especially in the social sciences, where her conception of the

“matrix of domination” has become canonized.<sup>32</sup> Published at the same time as Crenshaw’s twin articles, Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* introduced the concept of the matrix of domination, which attends to “how . . . intersecting oppressions are actually organized.”<sup>33</sup> The “matrix” approach emphasizes how racism, sexism, capitalism, and heteronormativity are structurally organized and thus is allied with terms like “metalanguage of race” that sought to attend to structures of power rather than identity and subjectivity. While Collins roots the matrix of domination in a larger project of centering black women as knowledge producers, her conception underscores that there are “few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives.”<sup>34</sup> In this account, the labor of the matrix of domination is to describe the specificities of social location and the violence that structures of domination inflict, in various ways and in differing severity, on everyone.

My intellectual history of intersectionality foregrounds the variety of terms black feminists have deployed to capture the complexity of structures of domination. Given black feminists’ long-standing investment in theorizing the “interlocking” nature of power, it is worth considering how and why intersectionality came to be *the* preeminent term for theorizing these structures. Perhaps it is the term’s irresistible visuality, its ability to be represented—even if reductively—through the crossroads metaphor that has given it a life in and beyond women’s studies, and well beyond its own investment in remedying forms of juridical violence and exclusion. Unlike Kathy Davis, who treats intersectionality’s “success” as fundamentally rooted in its “vagueness,” I speculate that it is the term’s capacity to allow its reader to imagine its analytic import, to neatly and coherently represent a term that aspires to describe complexity, that has given intersectionality its ability to migrate across entrenched disciplinary divides and to become “the most important contribution women’s studies . . . has made so far.”<sup>35</sup>

### Intersectionality’s Institutional Histories

In this section, I engage in another kind of historicization of intersectionality, with a particular focus on what I term the “institutional life” of intersectionality. By institutional life, I am referring both to how intersectionality has become women’s studies’ primary program-building tool and institutional goal and to how intersectionality has been rhetorically and

symbolically collapsed into diversity, and thus taken up as an inclusion project that resonates with the mission of the so-called corporate university.<sup>36</sup> To be clear, my investment in the term “institutional life” is not to suggest that intersectionality was once outsider knowledge wholly detached from institutions and now finds itself problematically located within the university. Instead, I ask how an analytic often tethered to black feminism and to black woman came to be a term that both universities and specific university departments embrace and extol. What do women’s studies programs and departments mean when they articulate intersectionality as their core orientation, as animating their pedagogical approaches, their hiring strategies, and their curricula building practices? If intersectionality has myriad competing meanings, what do university administrators mean when they deploy the term? How have they effectively mobilized the term as something that moves alongside diversity and inclusion?

### *Women’s Studies*

These are introspective times in women’s studies. Indeed, a number of now canonical anthologies, including *Women’s Studies for the Future*, *Women’s Studies on its Own*, and *Women’s Studies on the Edge*, grapple with what Robyn Wiegman calls the “institutional project of academic feminism,” posing questions like “Did we run the risk of affirming a system we sought radically to alter?,” and examining whether institutionalized women’s studies has ceded what Joan Wallach Scott calls “its critical edge,” its “place of indeterminacy, at once exciting and precarious.”<sup>37</sup> These queries have their own temporal logic, with many scholars treating the 1990s, the moment when women’s studies programs labored for institutional recognition and status, as “amazingly productive and exciting years. . . . In that context, women’s studies gained institutional footing and funding in the form of faculty lines and/or joint appointments, student majors, and even degree-generating graduate programs.”<sup>38</sup> This “productive and exciting” time gave way to the emergence of what Scott terms feminist “orthodoxy” or what Wendy Brown theorizes as a “politically and theoretically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative” disciplinary project.<sup>39</sup> This introspective narrative often organizes itself around loss—women’s studies institutional gains are marked by a sadness at the imagined “incoherence” of the field, or a sense that the political energy of the field has been lost.

In recent years, the introspective turn has taken on another dimension, moving away from the ethics and politics of institutional life and instead

probing the field's critical attachments, political desires, and prevailing narratives and engaging in corrective histories that resurrect terms like "lesbian," "woman," and "second wave feminism." Scholars like Wiegman, Hemmings, and Victoria Hesford have invited us to reconsider the "stories we tell" and to critically interrogate the affective pull of prevailing stories about our discipline(s), its histories and futures. I imagine my analysis of women's studies' long engagement with black feminism, and its specific engagements with intersectionality, as a contribution to the introspective turn that examines the discipline's *racialized* attachments and narratives. As part of my contribution to theorizing the field and its racialized "stories," I make two intimately related arguments about women's studies: First, women's studies has long constructed black feminism as a form of discipline inflicted on the field and has imagined black feminists as a set of disciplinarians who quite literally whip the field into shape with their demands for a feminism that accounts for race generally, and for black women specifically. Of course, in an account where black women's primary labor is to remedy—and perhaps even to save—the field from itself, the discipline treats black women, and black feminism, as a finite resource. Once the field has effectively reconfigured itself, black feminism is imagined as no longer necessary or vital. Nowhere has this simplistic construction unfolded more visibly than in the context of intersectionality, a term that is obsessively signaled by the field as precisely what is required to remedy feminism's histories of racism and exclusion. In other words, intersectionality is imagined as the flip side of "white feminism," the kind of ethical, inclusive, and complex feminism required for feminists to revive—and to complete—their political project. Second, intersectionality has become far more than a term with an intellectual history, a term that emerged out of a cohort of black feminist engagements with the "interlocking" nature of structures of domination. It has become women's studies' primary program-building goal. As I argue later in this introduction, black feminist defensiveness emerges from these institutional conditions, from a milieu where black women are imagined as both saviors and world-ending figures, and where intersectionality is both peril and promise.

### *Disciplining the Discipline*

As I mentioned earlier, Hemmings's groundbreaking work invites feminists to consider and interrogate "the stories we tell." The dominant narratives that satisfy us politically and affectively become how feminists both narrate

and understand our own history, how we introduce students to the histories of our field, and how we organize feminist knowledge production. For Hemmings, the primary accounts we offer are progress, loss, and return. Crucially, in at least two of these prevailing stories—progress and loss—black women and black feminism function as key figures either in making progress possible and visible or in foreclosing progress and engendering a feminist sense of loss. Hemmings writes, “The forward momentum from exclusion to inclusion is achieved by a variety of techniques of comparison and citation that situate black feminist critiques as essential to the transformation of Western feminist theory.”<sup>40</sup> Here, the labor of black feminist theory is to serve women’s studies, to ensure the discipline’s “forward momentum” and “transformation.” In the “progress” account, black feminism—and black women—are the literal and epistemological bodies that have made possible the transformation of the field from a focus on gender to an intersectional focus.

Nowhere is the “progress” that women of color generally, and black women specifically, are called upon to produce for the field more visible than in the women’s studies classroom. Lee provides an explication of the place of “women of color” classes in the women’s studies curriculum, arguing that they act as a “racial alibi” where “the bodies of knowledge produced by and about women of color are less important than the hailing of ‘women of color’ as a synecdoche for women’s studies’ own blindspots.”<sup>41</sup> As Lee further contends, “Women’s studies imagines itself as having, *in the past*, omitted a race-conscious perspective in its primary focus on gender and, *in the present*, as working toward a more inclusive analysis, considering the simultaneous subjectivizing discourses of race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and so forth. . . . [W]omen of color symbolize the potentiality of feminist studies’ critical future.”<sup>42</sup> For Lee, the “women of color” course performs crucial affective and political work in the women’s studies curriculum, announcing the transformation of the discipline. That these courses often conflate bodies of knowledge and the racially marked bodies of the scholars regularly called upon to teach the courses suggests precisely the danger of the “racial alibi” that Lee maps. While making a very different argument, Wendy Brown also highlights the place of the “women of color” course in the women’s studies curriculum, capturing how students often responded to it in “intensely emotional” ways. She notes, “Faculty, curriculum, and students in women’s studies programs are in a relentless, compensatory cycle of guilt and blame about race, a cycle structured by women’s



studies' original, nominalist and conceptual subordination of race (and all other forms of social stratification) to gender."<sup>43</sup> Of course, this very "cycle" that Brown captures is the result not simply of the elevation of gender to the center of women's studies but also of the discipline's figuration of black woman as aggrieved subject demanding that she be accounted for, a demand that produces precisely the complex affects Brown traces, affects of "guilt and blame." Both Brown and Lee were writing before the "citational ubiquity" of intersectionality; now it has become abundantly clear that intersectionality stands as the paradigmatic example of feminism's progress. Indeed, if there is nothing more damning than the accusation of "white feminism," intersectionality stands as the field's primary corrective, its way of naming and labeling (even if not performing) a correct, ethical, and virtuous feminism.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, there is a flip side—or multiple flip sides—to the "progress" narrative. If black feminist theory enabled the field to "progress," and if black feminist theory's main contribution was a demand for inclusion, then the labor of the field is complete and black feminist theory is no longer relevant or required in the way it once was. As Hemmings suggests, the underside of progress is also loss, a melancholic sense that the imagined demands of black feminism, and of black women, have produced the loss of the simplistic and coherent category of gender as the centerpiece of our work. Black women's demands, then, have fractured feminism. This anxiety is particularly visible in debates about intersectionality's imagined goal of capturing an impossible "etc.," an account of the social universe that can attend to the unending complexity of both identity and the social world. Indeed, in her now famous diagnosis of the "impossibility of women's studies," Brown points to intersectional ethics as part of the incoherence of the field. She writes, "Subjects of gender, class, nationality, race, sexuality, and so forth, are created through different histories, different mechanisms and sites of power, different discursive formations, different regulatory schemes. On the other hand, we are not fabricated as subjects in discrete units by these various powers: they do not operate on and through us independently, or linearly, or cumulatively."<sup>45</sup> For Brown, complex theories of subject formation like intersectionality work through attempts at "greater levels of specificity," which she describes as "mapping the precise formation of the contemporary 'middle-class Tejana lesbian,'" but this strategy simply replaces simplistic shorthand with seemingly more precise shorthand. Here, intersectionality produces an account of power that fails to

“historicize and theorize” and instead simply reproduces a thin conception of power invested in precisely the concepts it aspires to deconstruct.

In this account, the labor of black feminism is imagined primarily as a critique of women’s studies. Brittney Cooper captures this characterization of black feminism, noting that “non-Black feminists reduce Black feminist knowledge production into the status of an intervention in the broader project of feminism. . . . Treating Black feminism as primarily an anti-racist intervention within feminism continues to render it as a disruptive and temporary event, to be addressed, responded to, and moved on from, back to the regularly scheduled course of things.”<sup>46</sup> The continued blindness to black feminism as *an autonomous intellectual and political tradition* that has engaged in theorizing myriad questions, developed multiple analytics including intersectionality, and done far more than ask to be “accounted for” and included in feminist theory is what enables women’s studies to continue representing black feminist theory as merely a critique.

### *Program Building*

Intersectionality is now celebrated as “*the* primary figure of political completion in US identity knowledge domains,” as “part of the gender studies canon,” as “a new *raison d’être* for doing feminist theory and analysis,” and as “the most cutting-edge approach to the politics of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, nowhere has intersectionality’s remedial promise been vocalized more forcefully than in feminism generally, and in women’s studies specifically. As I consider the term’s life in academic feminism’s program-building initiatives, it is crucial to note that intersectionality has become absolutely central to US feminism’s political life, something I discuss at greater length in the book’s coda. The now familiar mandate that “if your feminism isn’t intersectional, it’s bullshit” suggests the ways that intersectionality has become a kind of article of faith, and here, my intention is not to resonate with Sullivan’s contention that intersectionality is “religion” but rather to invite an interrogation of the notion of intersectionality as an unqualified ethical good and “more” intersectionality as an even better ethical good.<sup>48</sup> Even as intersectionality remains fluid—and perhaps even ambiguous—in its meaning, there seems to be consensus that it is women’s studies’ “big idea,” its key intellectual and political contribution, and even proof of the importance of the discipline itself.<sup>49</sup>

When I describe intersectionality as women’s studies’ primary program-building goal, I refer to how departments and programs now regularly define

their central mission as training students in intersectional theory, methods, and frameworks. Syracuse University, for example, describes the objectives of its Women's and Gender Studies Department as marked by a commitment to training students "to learn about gender with an intersectional and transnational approach. To study gender either in one's own society or in the world, one must come to understand how gender ideas and practices take shape in relationship with ideas and practices about race, class, cultural identity, sexuality, nationality, and religion. . . . The possibility of understanding and solidarity among women worldwide can only be achieved by an analysis of gender and gender oppression that places both within a global and intersectional framework."<sup>50</sup> Ohio State University's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department describes its mission as "generat[ing] and transmit[ing] knowledge about the gendered nature of our lives and the ways gender, sexuality and other categories of identity shape and are shaped by culture and society."<sup>51</sup> Berkeley's Department of Gender and Women's Studies notes that it "offers interdisciplinary perspectives on the formation of gender and its intersections with other relations of power, such as sexuality, race, class, nationality, religion, and age."<sup>52</sup> Denison University's Women's and Gender Studies Program "fosters critical awareness and intellectual sensitivity to women's issues, the relationship between gender and other aspects of 'identity,' including race, class, age, religion and sexuality, methods inflected by the interdisciplinary of women's studies, and how the academic study of women's issues and gender has the power to transform lives."<sup>53</sup> What these varied descriptions reveal is an investment in intersectionality as inherent to the labor of women's studies in the university, or at least as inherent to the labor of women's studies programs and departments that have effectively come to terms with the challenges that black feminism poses. In other words, a training in intersectionality—however it is defined—becomes central to how the program or department produces feminist scholars, and to how a program or department defines its value and importance.

If intersectionality is central to how women's studies programs and departments narrate their distinctiveness, it has also become a strategy that programs and departments use to build their capacity through hiring. Recent years have been marked by a proliferation of women's studies tenure-track and tenured faculty job advertisements seeking "intersectional scholars." These advertisements range from encouraging applicants whose scholarship is rooted in intersectionality theory—"we welcome applications from

those working in one of our three key areas of interest: . . . intersectionality/critical race theory”—to “preference will be given to the candidate who demonstrates the ability to include intersectionality in all of their syllabi.”<sup>54</sup> In this case, intersectionality as either an intellectual or a pedagogical commitment becomes a plus in the ruthlessly competitive and increasingly precarious academic job marketplace. In other cases, there are hires in the field of “intersectional feminism and critical praxis” where programs and departments seek scholars whose “research investigates the intersection of feminist politics, critical theories of difference, and questions of resistance.” Intersectionality, then, becomes a legitimizing strategy that programs and departments can mobilize to secure resources and to make tenure-track and tenured hires.

I linger in the institutional work that intersectionality performs because it is here that its status as both overdetermined and emptied of any specific meaning becomes most lucid. Indeed, intersectionality can confer value on programs and departments, aligning them with institutional priorities around diversity and inclusion (something I discuss further later in the introduction) and can confer value on job seekers laboring to distinguish themselves in an intensely crowded and competitive job market. Here, intersectionality circulates far from its intellectual roots in black feminist investment in theorizing the complexity of structures of domination. Instead, it acts as something that confers value, that signals an alignment with intellectually and politically complex theories. It is this idea of intersectionality as a “value added,” as a plus, as something that signals an ethical orientation that animates the analytic’s institutional life.

## Black Studies

While *Black Feminism Reimagined* focuses on the entanglements between intersectionality and women’s studies, the analytic has also had a complex intellectual and institutional life in black studies, one that I take up briefly here because intersectionality’s roots in black feminism place it at the tender (and sometimes contentious) places where women’s studies and black studies touch. In other words, intersectionality is often imagined as something that emerges in the spaces where women’s studies and black studies meet, as a critique of both the “race men” logic of black studies and the “white women” logic of women’s studies. Ultimately, this project argues that intersectionality has animated a kind of anxiety in women’s studies

that it has not in black studies, and my endeavor here is to speculate about how and why that is. While it is beyond the scope of this project to engage in a history of black studies' treatment of black feminism, I do want to trace a few distinctions between women's studies' and black studies' respective relationships with both black feminism and the specific analytic of intersectionality.

As I have already argued, women's studies has long imagined intersectionality not only as field-defining but also as transformative, as precisely the kind of disciplining feminism requires to remake itself in ways that transcend the racist exclusions that have marked both academic and political feminism. Black studies has historically staked out a very different kind of relationship with intersectionality, one rooted in an investment in theorizing black women's intellectual and political labor, and interrogating the politics of citationality. This is unsurprising in a field that has labored to carve out an autonomous institutional space for black intellectual production. Indeed, unlike women's studies, which has largely figured black feminism's remedial work as a way of remaking feminism itself, and as a tool for creating more ethical (white) feminist political subjects, black studies has engaged more deeply with scholarship invested in theorizing the invisibility of black women's intellectual labor and describing the host of ways that the academy quite literally cannibalizes black women. As Grace Hong notes, black feminist theorists have captured a "bleak and ironic future, one in which the university's fetishization of black feminism as intellectual inquiry does not render impossible, and indeed in some ways facilitates, its systemic violence against black women."<sup>55</sup> For Hong, this "systemic violence" is deeply material as she ruminates on the black feminists who have worked in the academy and died—June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, and I would add, Stephanie Camp. These deaths, Hong suggests, are part of the academy's systemic extraction of knowledge and service from black women, alongside the university's continued inattention to the structures of violence that mark black female faculty's day-to-day experiences. Arguably, women's studies' engagement with intersectionality is part of—rather than a departure from—the "fetishization" that Hong describes. This "fetishization" is one that Ann duCille diagnosed in her consideration of how black women are both desired and disavowed in the academy, and of how the field that black women produced—black feminist theory—has become imagined as a field without a history, without scholars, as an "anybody-can-play pick-up game performed on a wide-open,

untrammelled field.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, the labor—of love, of flesh, of spirit—engaged in by black female scholars has been replaced by the fetishization of the field of black feminist theory made visible in the one-off “women of color” courses that Lee describes, with no recognition of the work required to produce the field. In response to this simultaneous disavowal and fetishization, Barbara Christian called on black feminists to “be clear about the dire situation that African-American women academics face” and to “ask questions that at first glance may seem to have nothing to do with scholarship but are central to our survival.”<sup>57</sup> It is not surprising that in an intellectual moment where black studies is preoccupied with death—social and material—and with the ways that the state functions on black disposability, that questions of survival are at the heart of how the field interacts with black feminist theory, imagining the university as a place that quite literally kills black female flesh. For black studies, then, an account of intersectionality’s rootedness in black feminism, and its intimate connection to black women, is part of a long tradition of attempting to do justice to black women’s intellectual and political labor.

Paradoxically, a field invested in black women’s intellectual production has moved intersectionality to the discipline’s past tense by insisting that only certain black feminist texts constitute the field’s present moment. Indeed, the field’s current orientation toward afropessimism engages black feminist theory largely through the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Sylvia Wynter, often at the expense of a robust engagement with other black feminist debates, dialogue, and disagreement. (The institutional projects of women’s studies and black studies, then, share a practice of elevating certain black feminist theorists to canonical—and even sacred—status by insisting on the inclusion of only one iteration of the black feminist tradition in the canon in any given historical and political moment.) Drawing on this particular body of black feminist theory, afropessimist scholarship often unsettles the category of “black woman” entirely by foregrounding Spillers’s concept of ungendering, a term that describes how the Middle Passage transformed gendered black bodies into ungendered black flesh. As Samantha Pinto notes, “The enthusiastic re-exercise of Spillers’s vocabularies signals a critical desire to reanimate and realign Black feminist critical thought in a moment of political intensities that careen across ‘the living and the dying,’ between suffering and the capacity for pleasure, sometimes pitching one against another.”<sup>58</sup> This “enthusiastic” investment in ungendering unfolds in a moment when black

feminism urgently theorizes the “dead and the dying,” and when ungendering is mobilized to imagine how black life is lived alongside—or even within—spaces of death.<sup>59</sup>

Drawing on Spillers’s conceptions of ungendering and flesh, Patrice D. Douglass deploys the term “black gender” to capture how gender itself is “a category for Humans. The violence of ungendering is a domain for the captive, those who died in the hold of the ship and continue dying by the wayside of gender.”<sup>60</sup> Put differently, “black gender” reveals that gender—as a category of analysis—fails to describe both black bodies’ location as outside of the Human, and the violent force of antiblackness. “Black gender,” then, aspires to put analytic pressure on the utility of “gender” as a category for black subjects, and thus to problematize intersectionality’s thought project of thinking race and gender (and other categories) simultaneously in an attempt to do justice to black women.

Calvin Warren’s work furthers an afropessimist critique of intersectionality, arguing that an intersectional approach “seeks to understand blackness through forms of *equivalence* with human identity. In this instance, queerness and blackness are structurally aligned such that they become somewhat interchangeable forms of abstraction or are intelligible through each other. . . . We know queerness more accurately because we know blackness, and we know blackness more intimately because we know queerness, according to this approach. Put differently, the intersectional approach makes epistemological claims by presenting blackness and queerness (and other forms of difference) as ontologically equivalent.”<sup>61</sup> For Warren, intersectionality operates through strategies of “equivalence,” through presuming that blackness and “other forms of difference” are similarly constructed and produced. In a moment in which death has become a key term for black studies, intersectionality is often policed outside the parameters of black studies proper because of its imagined desire to treat identity categories and structures of domination as “ontologically equivalent,” and because of its imagined refusal to recognize antiblackness as the “metalanguage.” Moreover, for afropessimist scholars, intersectionality is imagined to presume that gender is a shared or collective category. Douglass asserts, “The archive of gender is structurally anti-black. Its assumptive logic, whether explicit in its presentation or not, maintains that all women have the same gender. This orientation of thought does more than render Black gender invisible or silent. It makes it conceptually impossible to think of gender violence as orienting more than the realm of gender.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Douglass advocates a

divestment from “black woman” as a category and, implicitly, a divestment from intersectionality as a political and theoretical project.

Of course, inherent to intersectionality’s analytic power has been a critique of the notion of gender as something that “all women” share in the same way. The very call to think intersectionally, to consider how gender is made through race (and vice versa), has always been a plea to imagine gender’s racialized contours, and to theorize how gender is inhabited, lived, and negotiated in particular, distinctive, and varied ways. Thus, while this book’s focus is on women’s studies’ engagement with intersectionality, I remain fascinated by an intellectual moment in which both women’s studies and black studies, animated by distinct political desires and critical aspirations, have made intersectionality *passé* even as they deploy black feminist theory as a necessary investment.

It might seem that my account of black studies has painted the field in a favorable light that I deny women’s studies. This is not at all my endeavor. Indeed, I find it curious and troubling that black feminism and black queer studies remain marginal in most black studies’ programs and departments. Moreover, as black studies moves more squarely toward an investment in theorizing death as central to black subjectivity, and in considering perishment as constitutive of black experience, I remain concerned at the host of ways that the dead are always figured as black men, and black women are those who mourn, who grieve, and who make visible black male suffering.<sup>63</sup> There remains a gender problem in black studies, one related to the “sexual and epistemological conservatism” that continues to mark many black studies departments and programs, and that continues to relegate work on black erotics, black queers, black women, black trans folk, black “funky” desires, and black sexual freedoms to the intellectual periphery.<sup>64</sup> My impulse here, then, is merely to suggest that the way these “problems” manifest themselves in women’s studies and black studies is distinct.

### The Diversity and Inclusion Complex

Intersectionality often moves along a set of terms that are imagined to be allied: “diversity” and “inclusion.” Here, I am referring to an array of phenomena, including the emergence of intersectionality centers at colleges and universities, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ advocacy of “intersectional frameworks” as part of larger strategies of diversity and inclusion, and the emergence of the language of intersectionality in



university strategic plans.<sup>65</sup> As many scholars have noted, “The distinction between intersectionality and diversity remains blurry,” and “the language of intersectionality is now associated with diversity,” even as intersectionality scholars often critique the (il)logics of diversity.<sup>66</sup> In this project, I explore how intersectionality is thought to be a diversity project, and what that means for the analytic’s institutional life.

Diversity has become the prevailing logic of the contemporary US university. As Roderick Ferguson has argued, the university has “cannibalize[d] difference and its potential for rupture,” so that “differences that were often articulated as critiques of the presumed benevolence of political and economic institutions become absorbed within an administrative ethos that recast those differences as testaments to the progress of the university and the resuscitation of a common national culture.”<sup>67</sup> For Ferguson, this “absorption” explains the institutionalization of black studies, women’s studies, and other identity-knowledge projects and their incorporation into the university as signs of the institution’s own commitment to inclusion. Alongside the incorporation of difference as evidence of an institution’s transformation, diversity has become a key rhetoric animating an institution’s self-presentation and organization.

Diversity has operated in an array of ways. In the wake of attempts to scale back affirmative action programs in higher education, “diversity” has emerged as a justifiable compelling state interest for maintaining affirmative action efforts, provided that racial and ethnic diversity is only one form of diversity that universities invest in. As the court explained in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, a US Supreme Court case assessing the constitutionality of the University of Michigan Law School’s affirmative action program,

The Law School’s claim of a compelling interest is further bolstered by its *amici*, who point to the educational benefits that flow from student body diversity. . . . [N]umerous studies show that student body diversity promotes learning outcomes, and “better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals.” These benefits are not theoretical but real, as major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints. What is more, high-ranking retired officers and civilian leaders of the United States military assert that, “[b]ased on [their] decades of experience,” a

“highly qualified, racially diverse officer corps . . . is essential to the military’s ability to fulfill its principal mission to provide national security.”<sup>68</sup>

For the court, diversity’s value lies not in its capacity to remedy past and ongoing racism and exclusion but in its ability to produce student-citizens prepared for an increasingly global workforce and for military global security service. The work of diversity, then, is not meant to transform social institutions but to insert bodies into existing structures and even to engage in “rebranding an organization.”<sup>69</sup> Yet because diversity remains permissible ground for continuing the labor of affirmative action, it has become a kind of critical vocabulary for engaging in what some have positioned as radical work, and what others have imagined as “a way . . . of marketing the university” and “making the university into a marketplace.”<sup>70</sup> The shifting logic of affirmative action from redress to diversity has led many scholars, including Sara Ahmed and Roderick Ferguson, to imagine diversity as a kind of “non-performative.” Feminists of color have been deeply critical of diversity logics, arguing that it is a practice of “benign variation” that “bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious empty pluralism.”<sup>71</sup> Banu Subramaniam describes the emergence of diversity as “an aesthetic of celebrating cultural variation and expressions of cultural difference within liberal discourse.”<sup>72</sup> For Subramaniam, diversity—like cultural feminism—is a project of valuation that attempts to prioritize “cultural variation” and “cultural difference.” Yet, Subramaniam argues, diversity has become corrupted in its “recent institutional incarnation,” becoming “utterly domesticated and depoliticized and largely seen as ‘good’ because it has lost its political roots of structural issues of sexism and racism.”<sup>73</sup> Like Subramaniam, Chandra Mohanty has underscored diversity’s “benign variation” logic, and Ahmed recommends that we exercise “caution” around “the appealing nature of diversity” and interrogate “whether the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge.”<sup>74</sup> Taken together, these scholars reveal the host of ways that diversity operates in apolitical and often antipolitical ways to selectively usher a few bodies into exclusive institutions.

Despite feminist of color efforts to problematize diversity, intersectionality remains a term that moves alongside diversity even as their respective projects are wholly distinctive and even opposed. Where diversity is a project of including bodies, intersectionality is an antisubordination project, one committed to foregrounding exclusion and its effects. Yet intersectionality’s

ascension within the university must be theorized alongside the ways it can take on the guise of diversity work, acting as a center-building initiative that can stand as evidence of an institution's commitment to difference and inclusion. May diagnoses our present moment as one where "intersectionality may be corporatized, used rhetorically to invoke 'good feeling' or manage institutional or national image, but not to address inequality. In the academy and beyond, it is being invoked as a means to allow 'business as usual' to go forward."<sup>75</sup> For May, intersectionality's easy conflation with diversity is an indication of how intersectionality "seem[s], for many, difficult to grasp or hold on to, easy to ignore or discount, or, perhaps viewed as ripe for extraction or expropriation."<sup>76</sup> Yet rather than treat intersectionality's conflation with diversity as evidence of practitioners' inability to comprehend intersectionality's complexity, I treat it as evidence of intersectionality's elasticity, which has made it relatively easy to institutionalize, to act as outsider knowledge, as institutional diversity project, and as evidence of the workings of the so-called corporate university that has incorporated a particular kind of investment in difference.

Ultimately, the university is deeply implicated in intersectionality's mobility, at least in part because of how intersectionality has been rhetorically mobilized as an ethic of diversity, and in part because naming intersectionality is often imagined to stand in for performing a kind of intellectual and political work. As Ahmed notes, "After all universities often describe their missions by drawing on the languages of diversity as well as equality. But using the language does not translate into creating diverse or equal environments. This 'not translation' is something we experience: it is a gap between a symbolic commitment and a lived reality. Commitments might even be made because they do not bring something about. I have used the term 'non-performativity' to describe this: how a commitment can be made to something as a way of not bringing something about."<sup>77</sup> Of course the "diversifying" mission—which is often articulated on the backs of black women—simply shores up the projects of elitism, exclusivity, and hierarchy that bolster the university. Yet speaking the language of diversity—which the university has again and again conflated with intersectionality—has become a primary strategy for garnering resources in the context of the corporate university, and so intersectionality has become a kind of lingua franca for university life. Finally, as the university is increasingly enlisted in pedagogies of citizenship—instructing students on how to desire, on how

to be antiracist, on how to perform Left subjectivity—intersectionality has become, as the provocations that begin this introduction suggest, a keyword, transforming students into ethical political subjects.<sup>78</sup> It is, of course, crucial to note that the reproduction of intersectionality by the university was often made possible by women's studies programs and departments (alongside allied fields) that agitated for foregrounding intersectionality's demands for complexity and attention to difference, even as college campuses are now so saturated with the rhetoric of intersectionality as correct Left political subjectivity that the term's specific meanings and histories are lost.

### Defensiveness and Intersectionality Wars

I am part of a panel at a small conference with a few other black feminist scholars, all of whom work on intersectionality. The mood is tense as we discuss the racial politics of intersectionality's circulation, its movement across the humanities and social sciences, and its status as women's studies' signature analytic. One scholar remarks that intersectionality's ubiquity reminds her of a passage from Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*: "Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff."<sup>79</sup> The audience roars in delight, and I find myself fascinated both by the deployment of Shange's provocative image of theft and by the audience's enthusiasm. This book was born of questions that emerged that day: Why had the idea of intersectionality as something stolen resonated so deeply? How might we understand the racial politics of this scene, one where a canonical black feminist work is used to theorize the violent theft of another canonical black feminist work? Who owns intersectionality, and who steals it? What might this encounter—the use of Shange, and the audience's reaction to it—reveal about the affects of contemporary academic US black feminisms? What does it mean when an anticaptivity project like black feminist theory claims ownership as a primary model for conducting black feminist inquiry?

I treat this scene as a point of departure to capture what I argue is a distinctively contemporary academic black feminist affect: defensiveness. I read defensiveness as a practice of a certain kind of agency—indeed, I argue that it is the primary form of agency that black feminists exert in the US academy. It is a form of agency that is seemingly exercised on behalf of black women's intellectual production, and on behalf of black women as subjects worthy of study, and one that does its work through an exertion

of ownership. It is, though, ultimately a dangerous form of agency, one that traps black feminism, and black feminists, rather than liberating us, by locking black feminists into the intersectionality wars rather than liberating us from those battles, and enabling us to reveal how deeply problematic these battles are. The defensive posture produces a kind of impasse for black feminist theory, one that keeps us fundamentally stalled, and that frustrates black feminism's political projects. Indeed, the defensive position is constitutive of the impasse, the "holding pattern," that marks black feminist theory.<sup>80</sup> Despite evidence that the attachment to the defensive position is toxic, the attachment persists because it offers the sense of collective world-making, and because it is the exertion of a certain form of agency.

The defensive posture unfolds not only through a territorial hold on intersectionality but also in and through black feminism's ongoing attachment to the university, *even as* black feminist theorists have long captured the violence of the university. In other words, black feminist theorists retain both a deep critique of the university and its violence—including the imagined violence of intersectionality's circulation apart from black women and black feminism—and a continued faith in the university as a space that can be reformed and reimagined to do justice to black women's intellectual labor. Indeed, very few black feminist theorists have called for a wholesale rejection of the university, or a profound investment in doing black feminist theoretical and practical work outside of the killing engine of the university, even as black feminist theorists including Ann duCille, Barbara Christian, and Grace Hong have posed crucial questions of the university, like the provocation "Can black feminism survive the academy?"<sup>81</sup> Thus, black feminist defensive tactics around intersectionality take hold in the context of a larger theoretical tradition attached—optimistically, self-destructively, or both—to the university.

My understanding of defensiveness is also indebted to Sianne Ngai's work on "ugly feelings." For Ngai, ugly feelings are "petty, amoral, and noncathartic feelings" that "offer no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions." The "ugliness" of the "ugly feelings" indexes social conditions of marginality and "state[s] of obstructed agency."<sup>82</sup> What appeals to me about Ngai's formulation is not simply the idea of "ugliness," the sense of a negative affect that is nonproductive (though, unlike Ngai, I view black feminist defensiveness as *deeply* cathartic, and as deeply appealing in the sense that it is an ethical and virtuous practice staged

on behalf of black women's intellectual production). I am also drawn to the idea of defensiveness as indexing an "obstructed agency," which for Ngai is not a personal (or psychic) condition but a social one. In other words, ugly feelings are a sign of the social conditions that allow for obstructed agency to be the only form of agency imaginable. Here, I argue, is the richness of Ngai's work for my purposes—it helps us understand black feminist defensiveness as an attempt to exercise agency, as a willful form of territorial exertion in the service of autonomy, but one that is frustrating and frustrated.

Ultimately, this book treats black feminism not simply as an intellectual, political, creative, and erotic tradition but also as a way of feeling. The felt life of black feminism is varied and complex, but what I hope to underscore here is that the felt life of black feminism is shaped by black feminism's institutional location in women's studies. In making this claim, it is not my contention that black feminism is a subsidiary of women's studies. Indeed, black feminism has its own lives outside of women's studies—in allied disciplines, including black studies, that have embraced black feminist theories, methods, and analytics—and outside of the academy. But it is precisely because women's studies has imagined black feminism as central to its institutional project, because the field is marked by a preoccupation with black woman, that I imagine black feminism and women's studies as bound up, and that, I argue, means that the felt experiences of academic black feminism are necessarily rooted in women's studies. When I describe the felt experience of black feminism, my investment is in considering how the tradition is felt by those attached to it, by black feminists themselves. It is clear that nonblack feminists also *feel* black feminism in certain ways, viewing it as a place of hope, retreat, anxiety, disgust, imagining it as both world-making and world-ending simultaneously. These are feelings projected onto black feminism and black feminists, often in ways that are supported by the field of women's studies. My own investment in tracing the felt life of black feminism, though, is in considering the structures of feeling that attend to and underpin the practice of black feminism in the academy by black feminists themselves.

In treating black feminism as a felt experience, I am attempting to honor the panoply of scholarship rooted in the intellectual tradition that has voiced the ecstasies, frustrations, longings, and fatigue of scholars who organize themselves around the sign black feminism, including Patricia J. Williams, Rachel Lee, Tiffany Lethabo King, Brittney Cooper, and Amber Jamilla Musser. These scholars have, in varied ways, named the complex experiences of performing black feminism in the academy. For example,

Cooper captures the experience of describing herself as a “black feminist theorist” and notes that she often receives “looks of confusion, eyebrows crinkling into question marks, and long awkward pauses, as colleagues wait for me to clarify. . . . This kind of ambivalence does not usually attend to my white feminist colleagues’ declarations that they are ‘feminist theorists,’ or that they ‘do feminist theory.’ Even if they have to give specifics, feminist theory names a universe of possibility that Black feminist theory apparently does not.”<sup>83</sup> If Cooper’s description of the “ambivalence” (or, I would argue, disbelief) that attends to reactions of her investment in black feminism, it also describes the experience of being a black feminist in the academy. To be invested in black feminist theory in the academy, Cooper reveals, is to inhabit a position that is subject to scrutiny; it is to require an additional explanation, or to be prepared to be challenged. In other words, the experience of being a black feminist engenders certain kinds of feelings in its practitioner, feelings of fatigue, of sadness, of anger. What Cooper’s account underscores is that to claim black feminism as one’s academic home is an experience that has an affective charge.

Ann duCille’s work also emphasizes the felt life of black feminism:

Today there is so much interest in black women that I have begun to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. . . . Within the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier. . . . This attention is not altogether unpleasant, especially after generations of neglect, but I am hardly alone in suspecting that interest in black women may have as much to do with the pluralism and even the primitivism of this particular postmodern moment as with the genuine quality of black women’s accomplishments and the breadth of their contribution to American civilization.<sup>84</sup>

DuCille’s analysis of black women’s curious place in academic life focuses on the felt life of black feminism and the paradox of being both “a sacred text” and “neglect[ed].” That is, race and gender are “hot commodities” while the fleshy materiality of black women’s bodies continues to be theoretically neglected. DuCille’s insight reveals that the place of black feminists in the academy is marked by an experience of what Lee terms “fetishized marginality,” being both desired and disavowed simultaneously.

In flagging black feminism as having a felt experience, I am also situating it within the broad tradition of affect studies. Affect studies, as a field,

has been notoriously inattentive to questions of race, and to the specific contributions of black feminist scholars in theorizing death, loss, grief, and ambivalence, to name just a few. My own desire here, then, is to craft alternative genealogies of affect theory that recognize and center the long attachment of black feminist theory to the felt life. Though a history of the affective turn falls outside of the scope of the project, I will flag that the recent investment in affect is often intellectually tethered to queer theory. Ann Cvetkovich, for example, argues that scholarship on affect is marked by an “interest in everyday life, in how global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience, [and this] is bolstered by the role that queer theory has played in calling attention to the integral role of sexuality within public life. Moreover, our interest in negative affects draws inspiration from the depathologizing work of queer studies, which has made it possible to document and revalue non-normative ways of living.”<sup>85</sup> I aspire to complicate genealogies of affect studies that downplay or entirely neglect the affective work of black feminism, and its centrality to making visible the importance of affect to creative and political lives, by emphasizing both how black feminism has treated racism and sexism as felt experiences and how black feminists have theorized what it feels like to do labor that is both desired and devalued inside an academy that was not designed to celebrate or even support black women’s intellectual work. Instead, I ask what it might mean to tell the story of affect theory centering, for example, Patricia J. Williams’s *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*, and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*. How might terms like “survival,” “loss,” “pain,” “spirit,” “grief,” and “desire” look (and feel) different when black feminist texts are centered at the heart of the tradition?

Moreover, one of the tremendous insights of affect theory has been its invitation to consider how structures of domination feel, and to suggest that simply naming structures fails to do justice to how they move against (and inside of) our bodies. Following Kathleen Stewart’s call to take notice, to inhabit, and to observe the workings of “ordinariness,” recent scholarly work has turned its attention to capturing what academic life feels like. Cvetkovich, for example, characterizes academia as a location “where the pressure to succeed and the desire to find space for creative thinking bump against the harsh conditions of a ruthlessly competitive job market, the shrinking power of the humanities, and the corporatization of the university.”<sup>86</sup> Cvetkovich reads (white academic) depression—the affect at the center of her



theory-memoir—as indexing a set of social conditions that mark academic life for both graduate students and faculty on the seemingly endless grind of the tenure track. This depression is steeped in ordinariness, marked by the seemingly banal texture of an everyday life spent researching, writing (or, not writing), responding to student e-mails, performing “service” labor, and teaching. Black feminists alongside women of color feminists have offered rich ethnographies of the felt experiences of academic life, a project that continues with celebrated volumes like *Presumed Incompetent* and *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*.<sup>87</sup> This work has foregrounded practices of racialized and gendered pedagogies, theorizing how questions of authority, hierarchy, and power shape the experiences of women of color in the classroom. For example, Paulette Caldwell’s work on the felt experience of black female law school faculty asks how it feels to be “the subject of a law school hypothetical,” a way of reframing W. E. B. Du Bois’s question “What does it feel like to be a problem?”<sup>88</sup> As Caldwell begins to teach *Rogers v. American Airlines*, a case centered on American Airlines’ purportedly neutral ban on employees’ braided hairstyles at work, she theorizes her own discomfort. She writes, “I had carefully evaded the subject of a black woman’s hair because I appeared at each class meeting wearing a neatly-braided pageboy, and I resented being the unwitting object of one in thousands of law school hypotheticals.”<sup>89</sup> Caldwell introduces the “problem” of the body for female faculty of color, the ways in which our bodies must be mitigated, performed, inhabited, toned down, and played up in a variety of ways depending on institutional and student demands. Williams describes these competing demands: “I am expected to woo students even as I try to fend them off; I am supposed to control them even as I am supposed to manipulate them into loving me. Still I am aware of the paradox of my power over these students. I am aware of my role, my place in an institution that is larger than myself, whose power I wield even as I am powerless, whose shield of respectability shelters me even as I am disrespected.”<sup>90</sup> Williams’s description of the central paradox of pedagogical life for faculty of color—how to “woo students” while “fend[ing] them off,” how to claim power in an institution that systematically “disrespects” bodies of color—beautifully captures the conditions of the present. Indeed, this body of scholarship has usefully posed questions like: What are the felt experiences of teaching when one is “presumed incompetent”?

Yet what interests me about this black feminist work on the felt life of academia is its tendency to efface the affective labors of intellectual production,

research, and writing. Teaching, it seems, is the space where racialized and gendered labors are most visibly performed. Research and writing are imagined as a kind of solitary refuge, or at least as spaces that are less fraught than the performative and affective task of pedagogy. This book asks: What does it feel like when analytics that one imagines as one's own—such as intersectionality—become popularized, institutionalized, ossified? How does one come to imagine an analytic, method, or tool as one's own? What does it feel like when one's scholarly work becomes termed a “buzzword” or is mobilized by universities in ways that feel at odds with one's own work? And what does it mean to feel that the symbols of one's body and intellectual production have become the cornerstone of women's studies programmatic ambitions and wills to institutionalism? My work intervenes in this conversation by treating defensiveness as the black feminist affect that attaches to the popularization and circulation of intersectionality. I understand defensiveness to be a space marked by feelings of ownership and territoriality, and by loss and grief. The book, then, theorizes defensiveness as the feeling that emerges when intersectionality is thought to be a lost object or, worse, a stolen object. It is also a book that seeks to encourage and imagine other ways of feeling black feminist, other ways of being black feminist and doing black feminist labor in the academy that eschew defensiveness and its toxicity.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Nathan Heller, “The Big Uneasy,” *New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges).

2. Andrew Sullivan, “Is Intersectionality a Religion?,” *New York Magazine*, March 10, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/03/is-intersectionality-a-religion.html>.

3. Sullivan, “Is Intersectionality a Religion?”

4. See, for example, Sunnivie Brydym and Evan Derkacz, “Andrew Sullivan Really Took This Opportunity to Misread Intersectionality?,” *Religion Dispatches*, March 23, 2017, <http://religiondispatches.org/andrew-sullivan-really-took-this-opportunity-to-misread-intersectionality/>; Laura Nelson, “No, Andrew Sullivan, Intersectionality Is Not a Religion,” *Patheos*, March 14, 2017, [www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2017/03/14/no-andrew-sullivan-intersectionality-is-not-a-religion/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2017/03/14/no-andrew-sullivan-intersectionality-is-not-a-religion/).

5. Tom Bartlett, “When a Theory Goes Viral,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 21, 2017.

6. I map black feminism’s relationship to feminism’s past and future in my earlier work. See Jennifer C. Nash, “Institutionalizing the Margins,” *Social Text* 32.1 (2014): 45–65.

7. It is worth noting that intersectionality’s varied meanings have also been animated outside of academic feminism, namely, in the context of feminist politics, and feminist scholars have recently debated whether intersectionality was born in the university, through political activism, or both. While this book only touches upon the term’s political life outside of the university, the kind of expansive labor intersectionality is currently called upon to perform in feminism’s political life and the debates that swirl around the term’s political promise (and imagined danger) have long animated debates about intersectionality in US women’s studies.

8. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 240.

9. Patricia Hill Collins described intersectionality as “gentrified” in her keynote address at the Social Theory Forum in 2015. The speech is available online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=...](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

.com/watch?v=pqToqQCZtvq (accessed March 4, 2016). For more on “stewardship,” see Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and chapter 4 of this book.

10. For more on black female faculty and service work, see Amber Jamilla Musser, “Specimen Days: Diversity, Labor, and the University,” *Feminist Formations* 27.3 (2015): 1–20; Rachel Lee, “Notes from the (Non)Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color,” *Meridians* 1.1 (2000): 85–109.

11. Lee, “Notes from the (Non)Field,” 91.

12. See Claire Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

13. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

14. See Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, “Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era,” *Feminist Formations* 24.1 (2012): 1–25.

15. Ange-Marie Hancock, “Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm,” *Politics and Gender* 3.2 (2007): 249.

16. Jennifer C. Nash, “Intersectionality and Its Discontents,” *American Quarterly* 69.1 (2017): 126.

17. Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14.1 (1988): 43.

18. See Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

19. Vivian May, “Intellectual Genealogies, Intersectionality, and Anna Julia Cooper,” in *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads: Intersectional Women’s Studies for Transracial Alliance*, ed. Kim Marie Vaz and Gary L. Lemons (New York: Routledge, 2012), 61.

20. May, “Intellectual Genealogies,” 61.

21. Vivian May, “Intersectionality,” in *Rethinking Women’s and Gender Studies*, ed. Catherine M. Orr and Ann Braithwaite (New York: Routledge, 2011), 157.

22. Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 16.

23. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Meta-language of Race,” *Signs* 17.2 (1992): 255.

24. Frances Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” qtd. in King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness,” 46.

25. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness,” 43.

26. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness,” 47.

27. Brittney Cooper, “Intersectionality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Jane Disch and M. E. Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 386.

28. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–40.

29. Anna Carastathis explores why only one of these metaphors has been taken up. See Anna Carastathis, “Basements and Intersections,” *Hypatia* 28.4 (2013): 698–715.

30. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 149.

31. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 151–52.
32. In my earlier work, I examine how Crenshaw and Collins were laboring in the same historical moment. See Jennifer C. Nash, "'Home Truths' on Intersectionality," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 23.2 (2011): 445–70.
33. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.
34. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 287.
35. Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory* 9.1 (2008): 68; Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs* 30.3 (2005): 1771.
36. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 240. The term "corporate university" (and other terms like "neoliberal university") is often used as a shorthand for a range of practices, including the rise of student debt; the proliferation of precarious adjunct faculty labor; the seemingly endless expansion of the job responsibilities of tenure-track and tenured faculty; the increasing demands for affective faculty labor; the deployment of rubrics, assessments, and other measurement tools to determine the value of courses and disciplines; the university's strategic deployment of signifiers of difference, including the uses of terms like "intersectionality," "diversity," and "globalization" to signal an investment in producing "global citizens" and diverse "learning communities." Robert McRuer notes, "Inside and outside the university, corporate elites demand that composition courses focus on demonstrable professional-managerial skills rather than critical thought—or, more insidiously, 'critical thought' is reconceptualized through a skills-based mode ultimately grounded in measurement and marketability, or measurement for marketability. The most troubling feature of our current corpo-reality is that composition at most institutions is routinely taught by adjunct or graduate student employees who receive low pay and few (if any) benefits: the composition work force, at the corporate university, is highly contingent and replaceable, and instructors are thus often forced to piece together multiple appointments at various schools in a region." Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 148. Matthew Frye Jacobson echoes this in his 2012 ASA presidential address: "As bastions of military research and as traditional purveyors of legitimizing imperialist narratives, universities are implicated in imperialist aggrandizement, but universities also find themselves imperiled under the neoliberal regime of privatization, enforced public austerity, market orientation, and atomized notions of civic collectivity and destiny. Yet, we must insist, university communities remain potentially important voices—as yet unvanquished—in defense of democratic ideals and of 'the civic.'"

See, for example, Naomi Greyser and Margot Weiss, "Left Intellectuals and the Neoliberal University," *American Quarterly* 64.4 (2012): 787–93; Purnima Bose, "Faculty Activism and the Corporatization of the University," *American Quarterly* 64.4 (2012): 815–18; Jeffrey R. DiLeo, *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving beyond the Neoliberal Academy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Robert McRuer, "Composing Bodies; or, De-composition: Queer Theory, Disability Studies, and Alternative Corporealities," *jac* 24.1 (2004): 47–78; Samantha King, "Nike U: Full Program Athletics Contracts and the Corporate University," in *Sports and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption, and Culture*, ed. David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012);

Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918); Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Gregory Jay, "Hire Ed! Deconstructing the Crises in Academe," *American Quarterly* 63.1 (2011): 163–78; Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2014); Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Joyce E. Canaan and Wesley Shumar, *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University* (London: Routledge, 2011); Eric Cheyfitz, "The Corporate University, Academic Freedom, and American Exceptionalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108.4 (2009): 701–22; Andrew Ross, "The Corporate Analogy Unravels," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 17, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Farewell-to-the-Corporate/124919/>.

37. Robyn Wiegman, ed., *Women's Studies on Its Own* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 3; Joan Wallach Scott, *Women's Studies on the Edge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

38. Scott, *Women's Studies on Its Own*, 3.

39. Wendy Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 120.

40. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 45.

41. Lee, "Notes from the (Non)Field," 86.

42. Lee, "Notes from the (Non)Field," 91.

43. Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," 130.

44. My thinking on "white feminism" is informed and inspired by Samantha Pinto's talk "The Uses of (White Feminist) Guilt and the Production of Black Feminist Fatigue" at the American Studies Association 2017 conference, Chicago, November 9–12.

45. Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," 123.

46. Brittney Cooper, "Love No Limit: Towards a Black Feminist Future (in Theory)," *Black Scholar* 45.4 (2015): 15.

47. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 240 (emphasis in original); Maxine Baca Zinn, "Patricia Hill Collins: Past and Future Innovations," *Gender and Society* 26 (2012): 31; Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword," 72; Ange-Marie Hancock, *Solidarity Politics for Millennials: A Guide to Ending the Oppression Olympics* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 3.

48. Flavia Dzodan, "My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or It Will Be Bullshit," *Tiger Beatdown*, October 10, 2011, <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/>.

49. Svati Shah, panel conversation "Reading Intersectionality's Genealogy for Strategy: Reflections on an Intervention," University of Massachusetts Amherst, April 2012.

50. Syracuse University Women's and Gender Studies Objectives, [http://wgs.syr.edu/About/WGS\\_Objective.html](http://wgs.syr.edu/About/WGS_Objective.html) (accessed July 14, 2016).

51. Ohio State University Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department website, <https://wgss.osu.edu/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

52. University of California, Berkeley, Department of Gender and Women's Studies website, <http://womensstudies.berkeley.edu/> (accessed July 14, 2016).

53. Denison University Women's and Gender Studies Program website, <http://denison.edu/academics/womens-gender-studies/about/about> (accessed July 14, 2016).

54. I have decided not to cite the institutions that circulated these advertisements precisely because my interest is less in the specific institutional setting that produced the advertisement than in what these advertisements represent about the field and its investments.

55. Grace Hong, "The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization," *Meridians* 8.2 (2008): 96.

56. Ann duCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helen Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 31.

57. Barbara Christian, "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy," in *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985–2000*, ed. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene Keizer (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 214.

58. Samantha Pinto, "Black Feminist Literacies: Ungendering, Flesh, and Post-Spillers Epistemologies of Embodied and Emotional Justice," *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 4.1 (2017): 40.

59. Patrice D. Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," *Theory & Event* 21.1 (2018): 106–23.

60. Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory," 119.

61. Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ* 23.3 (2017): 409.

62. Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory," 115.

63. I trace some of this in my earlier work. See Jennifer C. Nash, "Unwidowing: Rachel Jeantel, Black Death, and the 'Problem' of Black Intimacy," *Signs* 41.4 (2016): 751–74.

64. See LaMonda Horton Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

65. On the emergence of intersectionality centers at colleges and universities, see, for example, Columbia University's Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, or the University of Tennessee's Intersectionality Community of Scholars.

66. Rachel E. Luft and Jane Ward, "Toward an Intersectionality Just Out of Reach: Confronting Challenges to Intersectional Practice," in *Perceiving Gender Locally, Globally, and Internationally*, ed. Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Texler Segal (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2009), 14; Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 14.

67. Roderick Ferguson, "Administering Sexuality; or, the Will to Institutionality," *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 162–63.

68. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

69. Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 52.

70. Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 52.

71. Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 193.

72. Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 15.

73. Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin*, 15.

74. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 193; Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 1.

75. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 90.

76. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 66.

77. Sara Ahmed, "Women of Colour as Diversity Workers," *feministkilljoys*, November 26, 2015, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/11/26/women-of-colour-as-diversity-workers/>.

78. See, for example, Jennifer C. Nash, "Pedagogies of Desire," *differences* (forthcoming).

79. Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1977), 49.

These lines are recited by the lady in green:

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff  
not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street  
but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff  
like a kleptomaniac workin hard & forgettin while stealin  
this is mine / this aint yr stuff /  
now why don't you put me back & let me hang out in my own self

80. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

81. See Christian, "Diminishing Returns."

82. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

83. Cooper, "Love No Limit," 7.

84. Ann duCille, *Skin Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 81–82.

85. Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (2007): 461.

86. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 17.

87. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris, eds., *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012); Deborah Gray White, ed., *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). See also Moya Bailey and Shannon J. Miller, "When Margins Become Centered: Black Queer Women in Front and Outside of the Classroom," *Feminist Formations* 27.3 (2015): 168–88.

88. Paulette M. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender," *Duke Law Journal* 40.2 (1991): 366.

89. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece," 368.

90. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 95–96.

#### ONE. a love letter from a critic

1. Patrick Grzanka, ed., *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014), 301.