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An argument for context-driven intersectionality

Ashleigh E. McKinzie[1] | **Patricia L. Richards**[2]

[1] Middle Tennessee State University

[2] University of Georgia

Correspondence
Ashleigh E. McKinzie, Middle Tennessee State University, 1301 E. Main, Box 10, Murfreesboro, TN 37132.
Email: ashleigh.mckinzie@mtsu.edu

Abstract

The concept of intersectionality has fundamentally changed feminist theorizing and the study of women and gender. However, intersectional research, theorizing, and practice also have been subject to important critiques. This article provides a brief genealogy of intersectionality and summarizes major critiques. We recognize value in these critiques as well as the ongoing power of an intersectional lens. We therefore advocate what we call "context-driven intersectionality," arguing that attention to the historical, political, economic, and social factors that shape power relationships and social structures is critical to conducting robust intersectional analyses that avoid reification of social categories and inequalities.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, intersectionality refers to the idea that systems of inequality (including racism, patriarchy, social class, heterosexism, ableism, and more) are not mutually exclusive but rather interact with one another, generating structural advantages and disadvantages that shape people's lived experiences in different ways, depending on their social location. Intersectional ideas and considerations have long been part of theories, statements, and research produced by feminists and scholars of color, albeit sometimes by another name.[1] This lens provides two important insights: institutions and social structures operate in intersectional ways and; as a result, all people have intersectional subjectivities. Intersectionality has been fundamental in deepening sociological understandings that it is nearly impossible to understand one type of oppression (or privilege) in isolation. Moreover, the roots of intersectionality are fundamentally linked to praxis and work for social justice (Cooper, 2016; Hill Collins, 2009; Romero, 2018). Thus, throughout the article, we call attention to context-based approaches that seek to transform the institutions and structures that create intersecting inequalities.

Despite its expansive influence, a number of problems have been identified in relation to intersectional research, theorizing, and practice. Perhaps most importantly, a great deal of scholarship purports to be intersectional but highlights difference without paying attention to power. Such work emphasizes intersectional identities without highlighting how structures and institutions operate intersectionally to shape people's life chances. In addition, the move for intersectionality to be inclusive of the intersectional subjectivities of all people has led to the concern that

intersectionality has become depoliticized, moving away from the Black feminist standpoint in which it originated (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Bilge, 2013). Finally, other scholars argue that there is a lack of methodological clarity for how best to do intersectionality.

These problems—and others—have led to extensive critiques of the concept, with some going so far as to argue that we need to "get beyond" intersectionality. Post-structuralists such as Judith Butler (1990) criticize intersectional approaches because of the ways in which they may reify categories of identification into stable and coherent subject positions. Others have focused on the need to develop a new metaphor, theory, or method to understand complex inequalities, arguing that intersectionality leads scholars to approach inequalities in ways that are too static and reified (Ken, 2008; Lykke, 2011; Puar, 2012).

We begin this article with a brief genealogy of intersectionality. We then present major critiques of intersectionality. Then, we turn to our argument for "context-driven intersectionality." We suggest that a focus on context—historical, social, economic, geographic, and political—is critical to conducting robust intersectional work. In doing so, we emphasize how much earlier work reveals the importance of historical, political, economic, and social context to intersectional analyses and also present examples of more recent literature that exemplifies this approach. Finally, we also return to the praxis and activism of early advocates of intersectionality, arguing that any sociological work on intersectionality—whether it focuses on privilege, marginalization, or both—must be guided by an ethical commitment to social justice.

2 | BRIEF GENEALOGY OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Historically, scholarship about social inequality frequently used a single axis framework, focusing on race *or* class *or* gender and thus elided the experiences of people who were intersectionally oppressed or privileged. For example, although many consider the early feminist movement to be a White women's movement, women of color in the Global North and women from the Global South challenged monolithic assumptions about women from early on. They argued that the experiences of women of color defied White feminist assumptions about gender inequality. In the United States, this type of thinking was invoked by Black women during the first-wave of the feminist movement. For instance, Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1895), often known for her important work on anti-lynching, was also a vocal critic of the exclusion of Black women from the women's suffrage movement. Additionally, she was vehemently vocal concerning the lies about and stereotypes of the "Black male predator" (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 1998). In the early 20th century, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) wrote about the specific lived experiences of Black women. She and Wells-Barnett were forerunners of contemporary intersectionality. Others—such as Sojourner Truth (1851) and Mary McLeod Bethune—likewise brought attention to the importance of thinking about race and gender simultaneously over 100 years ago.[2]

Black and Latina feminist activists likewise were organizing at the same time as second-wave White feminists, often in organizations and movements of their own (Pulido, 2006; Roth, 2004). Responding to the largely White, middle-class women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women of color insisted that women's movements also had to combat heterosexism, class oppression, racial inequality, and violence against women (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Davis, 1985; Hooks, 1981; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Swift, 1979).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991), a critical race theorist, conceptualized the term intersectionality, encapsulating some of the early challenges to monolithic thinking about race and gender. Crenshaw used the experiences of Black women who brought cases against their employers for race or gender discrimination to illustrate this point. They did not win their cases because their experiences were supposedly not reflective of Blacks or women as a group (Crenshaw, 1991). That is, the discrimination against them was literally unrecognizable by the law because their experiences could not be representative of women or Black people as a whole. Crenshaw gave a name to the life experiences that Black women and other women of color had been writing about for decades.

Other scholars around the same time period evoked intersectional thinking by using other empirical examples or metaphors. In 1992, Evelyn Nakano Glenn advocated getting away from additive models of social inequality,

suggesting instead to look at race and gender as simultaneously produced by capitalism and labor arrangements. The domestic work of working-class women of color enabled capitalism to flourish and function in various ways in different times and places. Moreover, she argued, the expansion of capitalism depended on working-class women of color's labor. Zinn and Dill (1996, p. 321) argued to move beyond acknowledging difference to an understanding of "the importance of race in understanding the social construction of gender." The concept of "the matrix of domination" formulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2009 [1990]) brought attention to the ways in which additive models of oppression can naturalize social inequalities and dichotomize either/or formulations (e.g., Black/White, straight/gay, and woman/man). Inherent in this matrix of domination is attention to "interlocking systems of oppression" that enable thinking about how race, gender, class, age, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity come together in ways that cannot be reduced to dichotomous categorization. All of these scholars show the importance of understanding co-constituting inequalities as a feature of society, capitalism, and oppression.

Intersectionality—as theory, method, or "analytical sensibility" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013)—has been reworked, debated, and continues to be relevant in both social scientific and humanities literature. It has been conceptualized and used in two broad ways, as we detail in the following paragraphs.[3]

First, scholars have documented that structures and institutions operate intersectionally, creating particular advantages and disadvantages for different groups of people (Crenshaw, 1991; Glenn, 1992; Hill Collins, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). As Brittney Cooper notes (2016), these structural inequalities were the impetus for Crenshaw's original conceptualization. Thus, intersectionality at its root is about structurally sanctioned domination and oppression. An additional feature of this approach is to show that concepts such as "Blackness" and "poorness" are not constructed in a vacuum (Glenn, 1999). The privileges that come with being a middle-class White woman are partly made possible by the material circumstances of people of color, which are constrained by racial, gendered, and classed hierarchies.[4] As Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill have written about multiracial feminism (1996, p. 327): "Intersecting forms of domination produce *both* oppression *and* opportunity. While structures of race, class, and gender create disadvantages for women of color, they provide unacknowledged benefits for those who are at the top of these hierarchies—whites, members of the upper classes, and males."

Intentionally or not, the focus on structural power inequalities "offered a way to begin talking about the interaction of these systems of power in the formation of identity," as Brittney Cooper (2016, p. 389) has pointed out. This shift is perhaps logical, as Cooper reflects, since "material conditions bear some relationship to how one identifies in the world and moves through the world." It is now widely recognized that, on the individual level, people have a range of identities and experiences that cannot be reduced to one stable category (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2016).

To some extent, this focus on identity is related to the insights of standpoint theory, particularly Black feminist thought. In general, standpoint theory emphasizes the epistemological advantage of starting from the vantage point of those who are marginalized by their race, class, gender, or other social inequalities in order to more objectively understand power relations (Hooks, 1981; Hill Collins, 2009; Harding, 1986; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). For example, Hill Collins (1986) maintains that Black women have unique perspectives because they are "outsiders within." Their marginalized standpoint gives them unique insights into societal power relations because they experience being *in* the dominant culture and simultaneously disparaged as *other*. However, as Cooper (2016, p. 392) points out, "intersectionality is not beholden to a particular epistemological viewpoint"; it is not inherently linked to Black feminist standpoint in all iterations. Still, a significant body of intersectional work today focuses on identity or subjectivity, epistemology, and voice. The best of this work also explicitly brings attention to unequal and unjust power structures and institutions, recognizing, as Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 75) write, that intersections "are simultaneously subjective, structural, and about social positioning and everyday practices."

In our view, the best intersectional scholarship incorporates structures of inequality based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or other factors, centers knowledge and lived experience (as it relates to structural domination that creates inequalities), and connects to praxis (Cho et al., 2013; Hill Collins, 2009). Indeed, Cho et al. (2013) argue that most feminists who use intersectionality in their research will agree on one theoretical premise: intersectionality should aim, as both a scientific and political enterprise, to expose the inner workings of power and domination.

The best intersectional analyses draw attention to the unique experiences (of privilege in some cases and oppression in others) of people who are situated differently in the matrix of domination as well as the particular ways race, gender, and class organize society at a structural level, thus institutionalizing and naturalizing these hierarchies.

3 | CRITIQUING INTERSECTIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

In this section, we discuss five major criticisms of intersectionality: deductively driven analyses, reification, and other methodological limitations; attention to difference *without* attention to power; depoliticization; the fetishization or erasure of Black women in creating intersectional knowledge and frameworks; and the impossibility of signification.

The first critique encompasses methodological concerns. One element here is a tendency to use intersectionality in a deductive and top–down manner, arbitrarily including categories for analysis without considering context. To give an example of this type of thinking, Davis (2008) warns of a tendency toward "infinite regress" in intersectional projects. She asks how a scholar knows when to stop adding axes of oppression and marginalization such as race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, immigration status, and age. We understand this "what variables to include" question as being driven by positivism because it seems to imply that the question is answerable in some generalizable way.

Moreover, some scholars argue that there is no methodological clarity for how best to *do* intersectionality. For example, Hancock (2007) argues that using intersectionality to study the most disadvantaged intersections can be interpreted as the "oppression Olympics." Her meaning is quite literal; in her reading, intersectionality becomes a competition wherein the most marginalized "wins." Hancock argues that in order to avoid this, when scholars apply an intersectional approach, they should devote equal attention to privileged and marginalized groups. Hancock's reasoning stems from her desire for intersectionality to become a useful paradigm in her discipline of political science, which privileges quantitative empirical research. While there might be some utility in Hancock's recommendations, this particular critique has the potential to further decenter marginalized groups as agents of knowledge—working against a central goal of an intersectional framework.

A second critique is that some intersectional scholarship pays attention to identity and difference without linking it to power. Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011), for example, observes a tendency to think of intersectionality as a way to indicate the multiple identities people possess, rather than understanding them as a product of structural inequalities that merit material redress. Indeed, in some analyses, intersectionality has descended away from relational and structural approaches into a notion that every individual has their own views/experiences. Even worse, some use intersectionality as a means to assert, "We are all different, and we all have intersecting identifications." While not untrue, such a position lacks an analysis of power, reducing intersectionality to a focus on diversity. Focusing only on identity in this way—common among students as well as in activist and academic work— is a serious misreading of standpoint, intersectionality, and situated knowledges. Indeed, rather than focusing exclusively on identity, each of these concepts entails a critique of the racism, sexism, and heterosexism that structure people's lives as well as the production and legitimation of knowledge.

Sirma Bilge (2013) shows how this problem manifested in the Occupy Wall Street and SlutWalk social movements, observing that movement organizations championed inclusivity at the level of identity but failed to see how power structures (including in their own movements) reinforced inequality. She notes, "Despite their best intentions and claims of inclusiveness and solidarity many have fallen short…and prompted their own kinds of silencing, exclusion, or misrepresentation of subordinated groups" (p. 406). In activism as well as scholarship, then, focusing on identities alone, rather than the institutions, structures, and power relations that bring them into being and assign consequence to them, it does not do justice to an intersectional approach and, in fact, may merely lend support to critics of identity politics.[5] Indeed, Hill Collins (2009 [1990]) writes that part of her impetus for articulating the matrix of domination was to get away from identity-only analyses and additive models of oppression.

The third critique is depoliticization. Some feminists argue that intersectionality has become depoliticized as it is embraced by corporations and universities as a sort of stand-in for diversity.[6] Bilge (2013) argues that current

neoliberal projects imagine "fantasies of transcendence," that we live in a post-racial, post-gender, and post-class society. As attention to diversity has become "good" for marketing, she observes, intersectionality has begun to be used as a "corporate diversity tool." Puar (2012) and Nash (2016) make a similar critique. However, whereas Bilge criticizes how organizations mobilize the concept and reduce diversity to a catchphrase, Puar and Nash seem to suggest that there is something about the concept of intersectionality per se that allows its easy cooptation by neoliberal institutions. Puar argues that intersectionality has become mainstream because of its easy fit with the neoliberal fetishization of identity and difference. Along similar lines, Nash focuses on how the "'corporate university' has shaped intersectionality's relatively easy institutionalization," arguing that "there remains little engagement with how intersectionality's status as 'buzzword' is enabled by the analytic's resonance with universities' rhetorical investment in diversity, difference, and inclusion" (pp. 9–10).

A fourth critique deals with the role of Black women in creating intersectional frameworks and knowledge. On one hand, scholars such as Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012) note that there is a tendency to omit Black women from work on intersectionality. Alexander-Floyd argues that this does violence to the rich genealogy of Black feminist thought. For example, she criticizes McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007) for rendering Black women invisible, writing:

> *McCall focuses on revisiting the contributions of women of color scholars, but only to make visible a broader array of difference and inequality. […] Hancock suggests that intersectionality is not exclusively the domain of women of color, but is available to all equally. Indeed, she consistently argues that intersectionality is best understood as a general research paradigm (p. 9, 14).*

Nash likewise takes issue with what she calls the "ethics of inclusivity." When scholars insist that intersectionality has the ability to show all sorts of iterations of identity for anyone who wants to think about themselves in intersectional ways, it leads "away from an ethics of redress, a specific intervention invested in validating the distinctive epistemological and juridical standpoint of black women" (2016, p. 12). On the other hand, Nash also seems to take the opposing perspective, arguing that starting from Black women's standpoint or epistemic privilege leads to a fetishization of Black women's suffering, which can prompt scholars to "ultimately romanticize and idealize positions of social subordination and reinstall conceptions that black women's bodies are sites of 'strength' and 'transcendence' rather than complex spaces of multiple meanings" (2008, p. 8).

But perhaps the biggest debate regarding intersectionality across the disciplines is whether intersectionality remains a useful tool or if, instead, we should aim for a post-intersectional understanding of inequality (Puar, 2012). This critique contains a somewhat deconstructionist impulse, though perhaps by a different name. Puar posits that intersectionality has largely been applied using a "difference-from" framework and, as a result, much of this scholarship ends up recentering White women as the subject, whereas women of color are always the "other." Moreover, she contends, the perspective reifies socially constructed categories. Puar argues instead for thinking of the coming together of inequalities as an active process or *assemblage*. This means that nothing is static or fixed—that there is no ontological stability when thinking about intersecting inequalities. Puar does not see intersectionality and assemblages as oppositional, but rather, "frictional." That is, in her view, we do not have to throw intersectionality by the wayside but rather pair it productively with assemblage in order to focus on the encounter, the *moment* of doing, to understand "what is prior to and beyond what gets established" (p. 63). Categories in this view are not abandoned completely, but the scholar suspends judgment before understanding the assemblage at hand.[7] (See Lykke, 2011 and Ken, 2008 for proposals for other alternative metaphors.)

Thus, the critiques of intersectionality are wide ranging. For some, intersectionality is not scientific enough, not methodologically precise, and raises more questions than answers. For others, intersectionality is practiced in name only, omitting the long legacy of women of color's epistemologies and lived experiences. For others still, it has become too neoliberal and focuses only on identities. We are grateful for these insights because they have started a necessary conversation that will ultimately lead to more nuanced and less reified analyses of difference and inequality. As we argue below, we believe that intersectionality can accommodate many of these critiques when it begins with a consideration of context.

4 | RESPONDING TO CRITIQUES: CONTEXT-DRIVEN INTERSECTIONALITY

Starting intersectional research, theorizing, and praxis with a consideration of context (place, setting, history, geography, political or social relations), we argue, can facilitate an inductively driven, close examination of the power relations that are relevant to the case at hand, thus helping to avoid many of the pitfalls identified in the previous section. While the word "context" is one with which everyone is familiar, it is not necessarily a canonized sociological concept. What does it mean to contextualize? In their recent book, Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) include a focus on context among several "features" of intersectional work. They write that to contextualize is "to think about social inequality, relationality, and power relations in a social context" (p. 28). For them, "using intersectionality as an analytic tool means contextualizing one's arguments, primarily by being aware that particular historical, intellectual, and political contexts shape what we think and do" (p. 28). Here, we argue that focusing on context also can help researchers, students, and activists identify the inequalities, oppressions, and privileges that are relevant to the case they are examining, thereby mitigating many of the problems discussed above.

In this section, we draw from the work of others as we lay out why we believe a deliberate focus on context helps respond to the critiques summarized in the previous section and reinvigorate intersectional work. We do so in part because context was implicitly foundational to many early formulations of intersectionality. Indeed, intersectionality was borne from Black feminism, and it is there we find the tools to understand how categories are constructed by society, history, the law, and politics (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2009; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Zinn & Dill, 1996; 2009).

However, we want to briefly mention a critique Nash (2016) makes not of intersectionality per se but in regard to recent work extolling the ongoing relevance of intersectionality. Nash takes issue with the flurry of reflection from around 2010 to the present that purports to take stock of intersectionality, but, she argues, ultimately aims to protect it from critique. In her view, this work engages what she calls an "originalist" approach, which she defines as fidelity to Crenshaw's original two articles (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991) on intersectionality. Nash's critique is an important reminder that meanings and uses of intersectionality are multiple and capable of shifting over time. However, we reject the originalist label. Rather, much like Cooper (2016), we are acknowledging that Black feminists put in place the theoretical groundwork for understanding how inequality, power, privilege, and marginalization operate.

Moreover, many of these scholars have also connected their theorizing about complex inequalities to action, justice, and liberation. This commitment to praxis necessitates attentiveness to context. Whether the issue at hand is housing discrimination, invisibility in the judicial system, police brutality, medical discrimination, or structural and interpersonal violence, the goal of intersectional thought has been to start with real experiences of injustice to develop an understanding of the intersectional structural conditions that enable injustice to thrive and then to challenge and eventually dismantle, those conditions. Starting with context should also lay bare the urgency of the inequalities the framework reveals, thus compelling researchers to act in favor of social justice. That is, focusing on context reminds us that intersectionality is not only about observing parts of people's identities but about changing structural conditions.

Thinking about intersectionality contextually allows for a bottom-up approach to analysis and theorizing while also being attentive to the systemic and structural power relations and domination that structure the local, everyday social worlds that intersectional sociologists are interested in revealing (Choo & Ferree, 2010). This provides a way out of the more deductive "how many variables do I need?" approach to intersectional analysis. Intersectional work is at its most fruitful when scholars take a relational approach, in which the categories of analysis are not chosen *a priori*. Instead, the researcher should be sensitive to socio-historic details and the lived experiences they contextualize, both of which illuminate *what* types of inequality to study and *why* they are important. In other words, what categories are salient for one research project might not be important for another (Glenn, 1992). While we believe that methodological discussions about how to do intersectionality are important, we are not as worried as more positivist

scholars about what variables to include; a focus on context avoids that question in the first place. Nor do we think studying multiply marginalized groups leads to the "oppression Olympics;" contextually focusing our research sidesteps that problem.

Starting with context also pushes against the tendency to understand intersectionality as being only about identity and difference. Focusing on context is what shows us *how* social structure operates, giving us a sense of what needs to change and how to focus activism and social movements for liberation. It is in the attention to power rather than the continual reiteration or argument over the meaning of identity categories, where the promise of this lens lies. To the extent that intersectionality focuses on identity, it is in order to critically examine the contextual conditions—the sociohistorical forces, systems, and structures—that give particular meaning and consequences to different identities (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013).

It is interesting to note that some of the most vigorous critiques of intersectionality (such as those of Nash and Puar) reproduce this focus on identity to the exclusion of structural inequalities. For example, Nash (2008, p. 2) defines intersectionality as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality." Reducing intersectionality to subjectivity and identity facilitates the criticism that it is essentialist and reifying and allows for its delegitimation as an analytical lens. However, contextual thinking—which leads to a focus on social conditions rather than subjectivities per se—helps avoid this tendency from the outset.

Context-driven intersectionality also helps resist depoliticization. As Cooper (2016, p. 394, 395) points out, it is not intersectionality itself, but rather the "impulses seeking to displace intersectional frames, that [act] as a tool of neoliberal collusion, despite a continuing need for its political project within institutions. […] To lose sight of structural systems of power and their varied interactions is to enable 'neoliberal occupation' of putative social justice discourses." A focus on context can help point us back to the radical focus of intersectionality on institutions and power structures. It is the association of intersectionality with identity *alone* that has led to its depoliticization.

Context also can help answer the thorny and heated questions about the fetishization or erasure of Black women in intersectional research and theorizing. While Alexander-Floyd takes a hard tack on this issue, arguing that intersectional research should always focus on women of color (and Black women in particular), Cooper (2016) and Carbado (2013) have both pointed out that limiting intersectionality to a focus on Black women has its own dangers, denying in some sense the broad-ranging significance of these women's theoretical work for our understanding of structural inequality and power more broadly. Cooper (p. 399) writes: "We should remain skeptical of newer approaches to identity that take as their centerpiece a fundamental belief that the particularity of black women's experiences exempt black women from being the foundation on which broadly applicable theoretical frames can be built." Women of color have built an analytical approach central to understanding societal power relations and should be recognized for this work.

This does not mean that Black women's experiences are all determining or that they reflect the experiences of all people who are socially marginalized (Cooper, 2016). Moreover, we suggest, it is possible to theorize based on experience without essentializing it. As with identity, a focus on context can help avoid the reification of experience since specifying context requires recognizing experience as the historical product of a particular social and political environment.

Finally, in response to the anti-categorical/deconstructionist turn, we acknowledge a tendency to essentialize or reify inequalities and identity categories. However, we believe that a consideration of context can assist in avoiding some of those problems. A thorough examination of contextual details should lead researchers to theorize how categories come to be in particular times and in particular places. Indeed, responding to the post-structuralist critiques of Butler and others, Yuval-Davis (2006) draws attention to the idea that historical specificity can guard against some of the totalization and essentialism to which those critics object. She nonetheless refuses to abandon intersectionality because of the political necessity of bringing attention to how multiple inequalities shape and constitute one another. Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) respond to the deconstructionist impulse by noting that though their ranks are small, their voices are quite loud. Moreover, they point out, most of this scholarship is "done" in elite universities in the Global North, which itself has political consequences. They write,

> *[B]eing attentive to power relations that produce social inequality means that deconstructing identities within a situation of social inequality will have a disproportionate effect on poor people, women, racial groups, young people, undocumented immigrants, and similar groups who are disadvantaged within intersecting streams of oppression. (p. 125-26)*

We agree and argue that attention to context can also help remind scholars to be attuned to the local and how it speaks to power and domination in a general sense. We suggest that context-driven intersectionality holds the theoretical integrity and promise to address the shortcomings discussed above and do exactly what alternative approaches purport to get beyond. Carbado (2013, p. 816) similarly argues that those who wish to replace intersectionality imply that their alternate theory "has the ability to do something that intersectionality cannot do or does considerably less well." Carbado criticizes Puar and others for what he calls the "false necessity" of their claims:

> *With respect to the discursive, all these theories seem to imagine the synthesis or interaction of things that are otherwise apart. In other words, at the level of appellation, they are no more dynamic than intersectionality. This deficiency reflects a more general problem—to wit, that there are discursive limitations to our ability to capture the complex and reiterative processes of social categorization. (p. 816)*

Carbado's reasoning is clear. The language of co-constitution (and intersectionality) can help to dissolve the stability of categories while also drawing attention to the political necessity of fighting injustice based on them.

None of this means we should not work to make intersectionality more robust. For example, in much intersectional work, Whiteness, masculinity, middle and upper social class, and heteronormativity are not interrogated. Carbado (2013, p. 817) observes that while White, heterosexual men are still frequently treated as unmarked in intersectional scholarship, lacking "an intersectional subject position," this is a failure in intellectual imagination rather than an attribute of intersectionality as an analytical lens. Indeed, he compellingly demonstrates the ongoing utility of intersectionality for understanding categories of identification that have rarely faced intellectual interrogation. What is needed, then, is *more* attention to variation within and among groups for the explicit purpose of avoiding homogenizing tendencies, interrogating Whiteness (and the middle-class, masculinity, and heteronormativity) and thereby showing how categories are constructed with particular consequences in particular contexts.[8] Race, class, and gender do not mean the same things at all times and in all places, even for the same individual (and indeed, this is the insight critics such as Ken, 2008 and Puar, 2012 make). This is precisely why a consideration of context is paramount.

5 | EXEMPLARS

In the following paragraphs, we offer some examples of scholarship showing the importance of context while using an intersectional lens. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive of a context-driven approach; we simply want to draw attention to what we believe are some exemplars in the field.

Many intersectional scholars writing in the late 1970s through the 1990s were attentive to the context of people's everyday lives and demonstrated how that was linked to history, politics, and institutions (Higginbotham, 1982; Zinn & Dill, 1996). In their proposal for a multiracial feminism that articulated the lived experiences of women of color and the ways in which they are shaped by structures of inequality, Zinn and Dill (1996, p. 325) also note the importance of avoiding the homogenization of "multiracial feminism as an undifferentiated category"; attention to the particular contexts and everyday realities of differently situated women was paramount in their formulation.

Several other early intersectional scholars exemplify this contextual approach. Crenshaw (1991) used the context of different legal cases to make a more general point: discrimination specifically against Black women was invisible to the law. Likewise, Crenshaw's recent campaign to #SayHerName is an excellent example of how social movements and activism can use context and contemporary politics to bring attention to problems that affect particular groups of women in intersectional ways. Crenshaw draws attention to state brutality against Black women.[9] By "saying their

name(s)" aloud, Crenshaw is asking that we refuse to elide the violence done to Black women or render them invisible in movements that center the experiences of Black men or white women. Further, Black lesbian feminist theories and praxis, such as those of Audre Lorde (1984), have drawn attention to the importance of fighting heteronormativity and homophobia at the same time as other systemic pathologies; these systems of oppression intersect with one another and cannot be understood or resisted in isolation. (Again, see Combahee River Collective, 1977 in regard to this point.)

Hill Collins (2009 [1990]) calls attention to context throughout her body of work. Her work calls for understanding Black women's knowledge and to focus on their everyday lives as a way to challenge Eurocentric and masculinist ways of knowing and being. Moreover, the matrix of domination calls for explicit attention to context. She writes:

> *Race, class, and gender represent the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect African American women. But these systems and the economic, political, and ideological conditions that support them may not be the most fundamental oppressions and they certainly affect many more groups than Black women. (p. 555)*

Hill Collins is explicit: there are many groups of marginalized people, and history, ideology, and politics are important considerations when trying to understand systems of oppression. Glenn's (1992) work on how the labor market racializes women differently in distinct time periods and locations is similarly exemplary in its attention to context. Glenn notes: "If race and gender are socially constructed systems, then they must arise at specific moments in particular circumstances and change as their circumstances change" (p. 31). Glenn, Hill Collins, Lorde, and Crenshaw all emphasize the importance of context to the theorization of intersecting or interlocking inequalities.

More recently, Leisy Abrego (2014) has shown how gender and legal status (undocumented, temporarily protected, legal resident or citizen) intersect to shape the particular experiences of Salvadoran immigrant parents and their children left behind in a range of ways. Other U.S. scholars, such as Devon Carbado (2013) and Nikki Jones (2009), have drawn attention to the importance of context in their work. Carbado emphasizes unmarked context-dependent social positions in his analysis of court cases, and Jones reveals how gender and race intersect in various ways depending on the performative context in her research on young Black women in inner city settings in San Francisco. We also see Adia Harvey Wingfield's intersectional research on Black men in various workplaces as excellent in this regard (Wingfield, 2013; Wingfield & Alston, 2012). Wingfield demonstrates that Black men do not derive the benefits that White men do in the workplace and in fact experience a range of disadvantages precisely due to the intersectional meanings of Black manhood in U.S. society.[10] Many other scholars have embodied this approach, with or without explicitly calling their work intersectional.

Much transnational feminist scholarship likewise epitomizes strong, context-driven intersectional work, even when it does not make explicit reference to intersectionality. Indeed, one of the foundational contributions of this area of scholarship is attention to historical, geopolitical, and cultural context. Mohanty (2013, p. 967) writes: "I have argued against a scholarly view from above of marginalized communities of women in the global South and North, calling instead for attention to historical and cultural specificity in understanding their complex agency as situated subjects." Uma Narayan (1997) demonstrates this approach beautifully in *Dislocating Cultures*, where she shows how British colonialism distorted cultural practices surrounding sati in one particular region of India, contributing to a tendency in the Global North to see Indian women as victims of "death by culture." The point of such scholarship is not to be culturally relativist but rather to avoid universalizing women's experiences (between the Global North and South as well as within each of those world regions) and to better understand disjunctures as well as connections among women in different parts of the world (Mohanty, 2003). The work of Barbara Sutton (2010) on embodied suffering and neoliberalism in Argentina (2010) and Bandana Purkayastha (2010) on South Asians' experiences of globalization are excellent examples of this approach.

Shannon Speed invokes intersectional thinking with the metaphor of a mosaic. Speed (2014) looks at violence against detained indigenous immigrant women and writes: "I suggest that gender violence might be better understood as a mosaic, in which distinct forms are assembled and the overall picture created by their juxtaposition can

only be fully comprehended by contemplating them all together" (p. 78). Speed is arguing that gender violence is created and nuanced by race, immigration status and class. She continues:

> *Re-conceptualizing gender violence as a "mosaic" is not inventing a new way of talking about gender violence for the sake of better description; it has important political implications. One of my biggest concerns with the continuum model is that it posits individuals at one end of a linear scale and the state at the other. (p. 88)*

That is, thinking about gender violence as a dreadful mosaic shows the importance of theorizing about the ways in which inequality comes together in particular places and times in particular ways; the case studies she provides show how context matters for women who are situated in them. Other Native feminist work likewise epitomizes the importance of context to intersectional analysis. Along with Speed, Sarah Deer (2015), Renya Ramirez (2004), Luana Ross (2009), and others emphasize that Native women's lived experiences cannot be understood without considering the context of ongoing colonialism. Writing specifically about Native Hawaiian (Kanaka Maoli) women, Lisa Kahaleole Hall (2009, p.16) argues:

> *In the last thirty years, U.S. feminists of color have developed a substantial body of work focusing on the concept of intersectionality, where the interrelationships and co-constructed nature of analytical categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class are at the center of analysis. But the legacy of colonial conquest and hyper-commodification has made Hawaiian women's experiences invisible or unintelligible within both dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses produced by non-Hawaiians.*

Thus, the lived realities Hall studies require going further than some traditional intersectional analysis to consider the ongoing effects of colonialism, including the commodification of culture and Native Hawaiian women's bodies. Indeed, in the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins (2009) writes about the importance of including nation in intersectional analyses. All of the scholars we mention are attentive to context in a way that does not naturalize categories or fetishize experience; moreover, they exemplify critical scholarship that is attentive to intersectional institutions and power.

6 | CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF A CONTEXT-DRIVEN APPROACH

Attention to context has long been an important part of the best critical scholarship. When we examine the roots of intersectionality, the women of color who theorized about multiple forms of oppression paid attention to context, explicitly or by way of their argumentation. Additionally, those early formulations were not only about identity. They were epistemological critiques of a Eurocentric, masculinist, and heterosexist social system. We believe this is a particularly important point in an era in which diversity has become a catchphrase and intersectionality depoliticized.

What does context-driven intersectionality add to feminist literature about intersectionality and what are the implications? We see several contributions. First, as we have detailed, focusing on context helps avoid reification while also showing how inequalities and categories of identity are attached to structures and institutions. Second, drawing from the logic of induction, it does not necessarily hold that intersectional research must be accomplished by any single method—only that whatever method is chosen must be attentive to context. In the context of social justice and research, the categories chosen for analysis and organizing are identified inductively in an ongoing process (see also Grzanka, 2014). Similarly, the focus on context is borne from Black feminism, which demands that analysis and findings be connected to larger justice and political projects. Finally, it is cartographic and historical. That is, the emphasis on context draws attention to the fact that intersectional projects have unique racialized, classed, and gendered spaces, places, histories, and geographies.

Methodologically, context-driven intersectionality forces us to consistently ask if we are reifying or essentializing categories of difference and giving proper space to understanding how history, politics and geographic location shape

particular inequalities. This is not to say that researchers and activists must embark upon their projects *tabula rasa*. That is not possible. However, context-driven intersectionality requires, in the process of research and social justice work, that there is no *rigidly* defined program of what inequalities will be chosen for analysis. For example, in 2015, Sandra Bland, an African American woman, committed suicide in a jail cell after being pulled over and arrested for no apparent reason. Her arrest and her suicide brought attention to the necessity of thinking about how other women of color are similarly killed and tortured in jail with little to no police repercussion or culpability. This horrendous injustice brought attention to how the Black Lives Matter movement needed to be inclusive of how Black women's lives matter.[11] That is, Bland's death drew attention to the contextual issues surrounding police brutality against women of color and its elision in social movements—an example of precisely what context-driven intersectionality has the potential to do.

Moreover, and to reiterate, when we think about the radical critique inherent in intersectionality, it does not make sense to do away with this analytical lens simply because it can become depoliticized or reduced to a buzzword. Instead, we must keep radical politics at the center of intersectionality and allow context to guide analyses. Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall (2013, p. 795) point out exactly how and why intersectionality continues to be so powerful:

> *What makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is.*

This final point, to emphasize what intersectionality does rather than what it is, in our view is absolutely crucial in bringing us away from stultified, reifying analyses and toward more dynamic ones that begin with an analysis of the context at hand.

In this article, we traced the genealogy of intersectionality. We demonstrated how it has been used in sociology and address some of its critiques. We drew attention to context as a way to avoid some of the pitfalls addressed by other authors. Finally, we would like to suggest that beginning with context is particularly important at this historical juncture, as current events indicate more than ever the need for a robust lens through which to examine the mutually constituting structures of oppression and privilege that shape all our lives.

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ENDNOTES

[1]The scholars who contributed early theorizing to what eventually became "intersectionality" talked about it in a variety of ways. For instance, Hill Collins (2009 [1990]) has used the terms "interlocking oppressions" and "matrix of domination." And, as we detail in our "Exemplars" section, many feminists who do research on race, gender, class, and nation in the context of the Global South do not always explicitly call their work intersectional even though it exemplifies an intersectional approach.

[2]Bracey, J.H. Jr. & A. Meier. (1995). *Mary McLeod Bethune Papers: The Bethune-Cookman College Collection, 1922–1955*. Bethune-Cookman College. Retrieved on August 20th, 2018. URL: https://media2.proquest.com/documents/1397_MaryMcLBethuneCollege.pdf

[3]Other scholars have come up with more elaborate classifications. For instance, McCall (2005) has conceptualized three approaches to intersectionality: intracategorical, intercategorical, and anticategorical. Choo and Ferree (2010) also outline three ways in which intersectionality is commonly used: by focusing on "multiply-marginalized" groups and giving voice to their experiences, by homing in on process and using context or comparison to reveal structure and power, and by examining intersectionality as it is systemically embedded in institutions and structures.

[4]This approach shares many of the features of the context driven intersectionality we will outline below, including the focus on history and illumination of how intersecting inequalities and privileged positions are co-constituting.

[5]See, for example, Mark Lilla's 11/18/16 op-ed in the *New York Times*, hailing the end of "identity liberalism."

[6]For one example, the "Out and Equal: Workplace Advocates" 2018 Summit Workshop included presentations on intersectionality in the workplace from corporations such as AT&T, John Deere, Quicken Loans, Mercedes Benz Financial, Allstate, Boeing, Freddie Mac, and the Dow Chemical Company. "Out and Equal: Workplace Advocates" 2018 schedule of events. Retrieved on December 18th, 2018. URL: http://outandequal.org/2018-workplace-summit-workshop-presentations/

[7]We thank Mel Kutner for helping us think through these insights.

[8]See also Romero (2018).

[9]Khaleeli, H. (2016). #SayHerName: why Kimberlé Crenshaw is fighting for forgotten women. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on January 26th, 2019. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women.

[10]For more work on intersecting inequalities that vary based on context and the site of empirical research, see Bettie's (2000) work on social class, ethnicity, age, and teenage girls in Central California and Hamilton and Armstrong's (2009) on women's sexuality, class, and gender in the context of a college campus.

[11]Little, A. (2015). Kimberlé Crenshaw on Sandra Bland and why we need to Say Her Name. *Ms. Magazine*. Retrieved on August 20th, 2018. URL: http://msmagazine.com/blog/2015/07/30/kimberle-crenshaw-on-sandra-bland-why-we-need-to-sayhername/. Although the founders of BLM are Black women whose vision for the movement is wide-ranging and gender-inclusive, those concerns sometimes have been elided as the movement expanded across the country as a result of several high profile cases of police violence against Black men.

ORCID

Ashleigh E. McKinzie https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5302-0182

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ashleigh E. McKinzie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Middle Tennessee State University. She researches long-term recovery from disasters, racial inequality, and violence against women. Her current project examines violence against women in evangelical Christian settings. Her previous research has been published in *Social Forces*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Deviant Behavior*, *Disasters*, and *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health and Well-being*.

Patricia Richards is a Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Georgia. She has authored two books, *Pobladoras, Indígenas and the State: Conflicts Over Women's Rights in Chile* and *Race and the Chilean Miracle: Neoliberalism, Democracy, and Indigenous Rights*. She is currently working on a book with Rebecca Hanson (University of Florida) entitled *Ethnographic Fixations: What Sexual Harassment Can Teach Us about the Construction of Knowledge*. Her research has been published in *Social Forces*, *Gender & Society*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Forum*, *Politics and Gender*, and the *Journal of Latin American Studies*, as well as authoring many other articles and book chapters.

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