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Intersectionality in digital feminist knowledge cultures: the practices and politics of a travelling theory

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Abstract

Intersectionality is a travelling theory; now enjoying significant contemporary visibility and popularity in the feminist blogosphere, it has moved across disciplines and borders in ways that are quite distinct from the scholarly critique developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw some time ago. In this article, I consider how intersectionality is translated, and *retheorised*, as an intertwined set of everyday knowledges and associated governmental practices that both echo and diverge from some of the complexities and politics of its wide-ranging scholarly uptake. Drawing on interviews with self-identifying feminists in a pilot project mapping contemporary Australian digital feminisms, this article explores two overarching patterns in intersectionality's mobilisation. First, the shift to understanding intersectionality as an everyday conceptual grid plotting women's differences along one axis, and measuring relative privilege and disadvantage on the other, recentring whiteness and liberal multicultural models of diversity and inclusion. Second, the transformation of intersectionality into an abstract, individualistic model of conduct, involving the citation and classification of 'white feminist' behaviour elsewhere, in frequent judgments on US celebrity culture. As such, intersectionality, while seemingly popular, often remained curiously 'theoretical' and divorced from embodied, everyday practices. I suggest in what follows that such a model of intersectionality raises questions of the commercial, racialised, political and mediated conditions that shape the theory's visibility and materialisation.

Keywords

Anti-racism, digital feminism, diversity, everyday practices, transnational media, whiteness

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In recent years, as feminism has become increasingly visible and 'popular' in the Western media landscape (Banet-Weiser, 2018), intersectionality, as a framework attentive to difference and interlocking oppressions, has also attracted significant wider attention in popular culture. From its scholarly origins as a concept used to reveal the racialised and gendered exclusions of US anti-discrimination frameworks (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality has become an ideal benchmark for feminism, seen for example in the following injunction in the coverage of the 2017 US Women's March: 'to understand the women's march, you need to understand intersectional feminism' (Desmond-Harris, 2017). Beyond the academy, intersectionality circulates as part of a contemporary lexicon of concepts that have gained salience in feminist digital cultures and the blogosphere. According to Villesèche, Muhr and Sliwa (2018), the hashtag #intersectionality has been used over 100,000 times on Instagram alone; an updated search in 2019 shows that #intersectionalfeminism has been used over 500,000 times.

In short, intersectionality is mobile. It has 'travelled' across disciplines, national borders and social contexts, but often in ways that are quite distinct from the critique developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) some time ago (Cho et al., 2013; Lewis, 2013; Carasthasis, 2016). Indeed, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall observe that in its travels, 'some of what circulates as critical debate about what intersectionality is or does reflects a lack of engagement with both originating and contemporary literatures on intersectionality' (2013: 788). Based on a pilot project mapping contemporary digital feminisms in the Australian context, this article seeks to explore how intersectionality is translated, and *retheorised*, in everyday contexts. I follow how intersectionality is retheorised in what I loosely term digital feminist 'knowledge cultures', as a way of capturing the everyday practices of learning facilitated and incited through digital culture. As such, this article does not focus on activism per se, but on how intersectionality is translated in its circulation and use, to index the ways that theory 'talks across worlds' (Nagar, 2002: 179). Theory travels, Edward Said notes: it is shaped by its 'conditions of acceptance' and is 'transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time of place' (1983: 227). In this way, this article aims to contribute to emerging work showing how theory such as intersectionality takes on particular everyday practices and forms (Nash and Warin, 2016).

Following Sara Ahmed (2004), I attend to the affective entanglement of identity with the knowledge practices of self-identifying feminists in a context where digital culture, particularly social media and its entanglement with popular culture, is an immediate *everyday* source of knowledge, shaped by the individualising, commercial logics of online attention economies. Drawing on interviews, this article explores two overarching patterns in the everyday uptake of intersectionality in the context of its mediated visibility. First is the shift to understanding intersectionality as a conceptual grid plotting women's differences along one axis, and measuring relative privilege and disadvantage on the other, showing significant overlaps with liberal multicultural models of diversity circulating in the global north. Second is the transformation of intersectionality into an abstract,

individualistic model of conduct, involving classification of 'white feminist' behaviour elsewhere, drawing from US celebrity practice. I suggest in what follows that this model of intersectionality raises questions of the practicability, effects and politics of the governmentality it instantiates, as well as the contemporary mediated intelligibility of difference.

Intersectionality: shifts, contestations and popularisation

In the late 1980s, Crenshaw used the concept of intersectionality most famously to demonstrate the exclusions of Black women in the USA under anti-discrimination laws. In this framework, race and gender were highlighted as intersecting axes of difference (Crenshaw, 1989), coinciding with what Jennifer Nash (2011) terms the academic institutionalisation of intersectionality. Such institutionalisation has enabled intersectionality to significantly expand across disciplinary and geographical boundaries, and into popular culture, and in doing so to become subject to numerous debates. Crucially, this transnational circulation has not simply produced disagreements in relation to formal epistemologies, but also questions over how effectively intersectionality 'travels' in a highly complex and globalised world. For Jasbir Puar (2011), intersectionality is an overly static and additive framework that is incapable of addressing the fragmented and dynamic movements of identity in flows of transnational migration, militarisation and imperial power. Regardless of the contours of the framework itself, Patil (2013) notes that many contemporary analyses of intersectionality tend to implicitly treat it as a domestic matter confined to the boundaries of the nation-state, curtailing analysis of its geopolitical dimensions. Thus, although intersectionality is understood to promote a 'woman of colour' epistemology, the vast majority of its academic applications tend to focus on internal, multicultural developments in Western nations that are deemed universally relevant (Patil, 2013).

However, as Tiffany Lethabo King usefully reminds us, it is crucial to also consider the role of transnational circuits of power, 'anxious neoliberal subjects' (2015: 118) and practices of institutionalisation in shaping the significance and effectiveness of intersectionality as a framework. Time-poor scholars, decreasing investments in public knowledge and the neoliberal academy as an already always racialised site of power may work to flatten and objectify intersectionality without generative engagement with it. Pressures to continually innovate may produce too-hasty judgments that position intersectionality as a 'backward, Black moment in a postmodern and perhaps post-Black time' (King, 2015: 133). In these conditions, theories become corporealised in the figures of significant scholars like Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), individualising and fixing a transforming and evolving framework (Nash, 2011).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003, 2013) reflections on the way in which her germinal essay 'Under Western Eyes' has travelled across national borders similarly draw attention to the political nature of knowledge translation within a 'profoundly unequal informational economy' not restricted to but including online

networks (Mohanty, 2003: 508). Mohanty suggests that the take-up of woman-of-colour epistemology in the West has often been translated through a fundamentally depoliticised notion of difference, or 'diversity' that works in favour of an expansionist neoliberal project. This 'trafficking of antiracist scholarship across borders' (Mohanty, 2013: 981) disciplines and assimilates this scholarship into a useful object that reinforces the epistemological authority of privileged feminist circles. In this way, while 'Under Western Eyes' is not strictly an 'intersectionality' text, these observations usefully show how a theory that prioritises the margins may become a mobile commodity, resulting in a 'politics of representation or a politics of presence disconnected from the power and political economy of rule' (Mohanty, 2013: 972). Such movements, according to Mohanty, are effected particularly in neoliberal state regimes where both feminism and the notion of diversity have been, in some respects, institutionalised. Indeed, while Said's (1983) essay on travelling theory observes the necessarily mobile and dynamic conditions in which theory materialises, feminist theorisations such as Mohanty's and King's pinpoint the unequal and commodifying conditions in which theory often moves.

The very desirability of intersectionality yet the malleability of its interpretation in Western contexts may be shaped by its entanglement with liberal frameworks of understanding difference. Difference under these conditions is reshaped under terms of liberal governance in which variation is documented and made visible as part of an 'inclusive' ethos. For Maria Carbin and Sara Edenheim, such flexibility means that intersectionality faces a problem in its vague articulation as 'common ground' for 'structuralist, liberal and poststructuralist feminists alike' (2013: 237). Following Vrushali Patil (2013), this notion of 'common ground', constructing intersectionality as a straightforwardly universal framework, may efface the highly varied geopolitical conditions of power that shape how difference is relationally enacted.

In institutional contexts of employment, intersectionality may be mistaken for 'diversity', a framework privileging the inclusion and recognition of difference under the auspices of capitalist individuality. For Ahmed, the 'language of intersectionality is now associated with diversity' in Western institutional culture; and diversity, itself, is used a 'shorthand for inclusion, as the "happy point" of intersectionality' (2012: 14).

Accordingly, in the 'unsafe travels' of intersectionality, Gail Lewis notes that 'unexpected things can occur in the slipstream of travel when concepts and theories are on the move' (2013: 871). Following such interrogation of whether the integrity of a concept can be preserved when 'parachuting' (Lewis, 2013: 871) down into diverse contexts, it is necessary to attend to the affective, material and power-striated conditions in which intersectionality is taken up. For this reason, Crenshaw, co-writing with Devon Carbado, Vicky M. Mays and Barbara Tomlinson, argues for the need to map the movements of a theory, and rather than fixating on the efficacy of intersectionality itself as the subject of critique, to trace what intersectionality is being used to *do* (Carbado et al., 2013).

In this vein, we might attend to the dynamics of digital culture in shaping how ideas of differences and inequalities materialise, creating *knowledge cultures* that surface particular ways of doing antiracist and feminist work. It has been noted that social media has allowed for the speedy and wider accessibility and circulation of knowledge for feminist activism and the circulation of framing concepts and definitions such as 'rape culture', (Mendes et al., 2018). Indeed, for young people, platforms such as Tumblr, and online culture in general, are crucial gateways to political conceptualisations of identity (Keller, 2016; Byron et al., 2019), and as such, young people often adopt explicitly self-educative practices in relation to their online travels (Jackson, 2018). For young Black feminists, digital networks also allow an easier and more forceful articulation of their own knowledge, experiences and perspectives on racialised and gendered social life than is possible in face-to-face settings (Heuchan, 2019). And yet, even with the new visibility of activisms online, Jessie Daniels (2016) has outlined how the voicing of feminist concerns online has often marginalised the priorities and concerns of non-white women to privilege the seeming unity of a feminist 'centre'. In such online conditions, the widespread travel of concepts may resemble trafficking and plagiarism, divorced from their social contexts of emergence and the people who have theorised them. Moya Bailey and Trudy (2018) note that 'misogynoir', a concept they co-developed to name the particular racialised misogyny that Black women face, has been popularly invoked in ways that erase them. Trudy, for example, notes that while Bailey may, at times, be cited in relation to 'misogynoir', Trudy's own theorisation and development may be used without her naming. Such rewriting of theory, without its creators, is *particularly* facilitated through the notion of the online public sphere as a free commons, erasing its pre-existing and fundamental hierarchies and exclusions. For this reason, Crenshaw herself has frequently provided public commentary in recent years to re-orient the understanding of intersectionality to capture power, structure and its dynamic use as a tool (see e.g.: Coaston, 2019).

It is necessary to acknowledge that the everyday 'conditions of acceptance' (Said, 1983) of a theory like intersectionality are connected to the continuingly racialised and gendered structures of the Western internet. While these unequal infrastructures have been documented for some time (see e.g.: Gajjala, 1998), it is relevant to observe their continuing operation in the production of race and gender online (Noble and Tynes, 2016). Digital culture, like media culture more broadly, promotes visibility but intensifies its stakes, with non-white women facing intensified risks of abuse and victimisation in online public spaces (Lawson, 2018). The proliferation of content, visibility and celebrity associated with digital culture enables cultures of *divergence*: intensified modes of individual judgment, antagonism and classification (Bratich, 2011). As such, the mass circulation enabled by online networks may, within certain frames of individuality, popularise but also render vulnerable those populations already subject to unequal surveillance. This increases the likelihood that concepts, theories and frameworks advanced to

critique domination, such as misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy, 2018), are separated from the contexts and people who have advanced them.

In understanding intersectionality and its translation, then, it is relevant to consider what is practicable and intelligible in contexts that are shaped by their own pushes and pulls of power, whether mediated, cultural or institutional. Such contexts actively shape the effects of seemingly anti-racist politics. If, as Ahmed (2004) observes, the conditions are not in place for anti-racist declarations to 'do what they say', how do the power-striated contexts in which intersectionality is now invoked shape its translation and effects? These insights indicate that we need to consider the political *effects* of its visibility and circulation in terms of transformation, but also recuperation.

Approaching everyday practices

I suggest that media and digital culture provide a means of understanding the everyday interpretations and rituals through which feminism is practised and through which theories like intersectionality are reconstituted and put to use. This article results from a pilot project exploring dominant ideas and values about contemporary feminism through investigating how self-identifying feminists learn about and participate in feminism through digital culture. While the project did not exclusively focus on intersectionality as such, in exploring participants' priorities, practices and beliefs, intersectionality emerged as a strong theme in feminist participants' responses. I recruited fifteen self-identifying feminists based in two Australian metropolitan centres who engaged primarily with feminism through digital media. Essentially, this meant that the feminists I interviewed drew much of their knowledge through mediated cultures of feminism. Their responses highlighted the highly convergent nature of the contemporary mediated environment and the everyday nature of digital media use: my informants would discuss private Facebook groups (for further discussion of these groups, see: Kanai, 2020; Kanai and McGrane, 2020), the use of Tumblr, blogs, popular culture and their own offline feminist group meetings almost in the same breath.

As Sue Jackson (2018) and Mendes et al. (2018) note, in understanding the impact of digital culture, it is important to take account of feminists' *lived* experience. For this reason, I undertook semi-structured interviews as a means of understanding my participants' feminist social worlds, which spanned the online and offline. In the data collection process, I asked my participants to share examples of feminist resources they had consulted, or blog posts or relevant feminist social media content they had published, prior to conducting interviews. During interviews, my participants would show me examples of these digital resources, or sometimes a glimpse into the feminist groups in which they participated on Facebook. What was distinctive in these interviews was the immersion that participants reported in thinking through feminism, made possible through the everyday prosthesis of social media in their social and political life.

I did not specify gender in my recruitment, but all those who volunteered to participate were cisgender women, who gave their time *as* part of their feminist work, in order to assist me in my project as a 'fellow feminist'. Most of my participants were young women, with twelve participants in the age category of 18–35, and half of those being aged thirty or younger. These feminists were predominantly white Anglo-Celtic Australians, with one Indigenous woman and two of non-European ethnic backgrounds (Lebanese, Brazilian and Pakistani). Four out of the fifteen self-identified as queer, with one identifying as having a disability. While most of these participants had cultural capital that suggested middle-class status, some were first in the family at university, struggled on short-term contracts and casual work or were under-employed, complicating straightforward claims to middle-class privilege. All their names have been changed here.

Intersectionality as grid: plotting the breadth and depth of women's experiences

It became evident that 'intersectionality' was a concept which held a strong affective pull. My oldest participant, Rose, in her sixties, said somewhat wistfully that there was a time when women were more united under the banner of 'feminism'; however, my younger participants, particularly those in their early to mid-twenties, were keen to note differences between women as well as the political importance of not papering over such differences. Somewhat strikingly, in contemporary feminist digital culture, intersectionality was *not* up for debate, in contrast to its contestation and debate within scholarship. Rather, the genre of discussion accompanying intersectionality often followed diagnosis of how best to apply it, in terms of whether or not something could be identified in its character as intersectional.

There were two key aspects, then, in intersectionality's retheorisation. First, for many of my younger participants in particular, intersectionality was affectively interpreted either as an aspirational feminist identity, an adjective that could be applied to the self: 'I am intersectional' (an intersectional feminist); or as a practice: 'that's not intersectional'. The second aspect of intersectionality was that it constituted a kind of theoretical framework, in keeping with its scholarly origins. Yet, this theoretical framework, in keeping with the performance of intersectionality as identity, tended to merge with the practice of identity in that intersectionality became a framework for locating and classifying women's differences. The implicit presumption behind this framework was that such classification was required in the interests of *inclusion*. This perspective on inclusion came through saliently in the response of Rebecca, a twenty-two-year-old white university student, who defined intersectional feminism in the following way:

> How I would define it is the intersection for women, for class – sorry – I had it – I say it perfectly online. Yeah, class, race and gender and sexuality and how they affect women's experiences – women-identifying experiences . . . oh, sorry, and – I've never

> found the best term for it, but people with a disability. I'm not sure [if] that's enablist language, because . . . 'a person with a disability', I think, is the proper- . . . term . . . but . . . it's [also] a section for feminism.

Rebecca's definition of intersectional feminism condensed several significations. Feminism was condensed with 'women's experiences', and thus intersectionality was a means of responding to different 'sections' or 'niches' of women. It is worth noting Rebecca's care in her explanation to not leave anyone out in the implicit framework of 'inclusion' she adopted. Doing intersectionality was to acknowledge different audiences of women in an umbrella feminist framework. Thus, here, intersectionality was a means of understanding the *range* or *breadth* of women's experiences.

Alice, a white community outreach officer in her thirties, explained intersectionality as a kind of lens:

> I've looked at stuff through different lenses. So when I read articles on social media, I'll read it. Then as I'm starting to read, I might rip it apart a little bit more and go, I wonder what that comment would feel like if I had a disability? I wonder what that comment would feel like if I was a Black woman? I wonder what that comment would feel like if I was really skinny or really fat or Asian or really tall or really short or had a mental health difficulty or was a transgender female, so on and so forth.

For Alice, then, intersectionality was a lens for understanding the sheer range of women's experiences, from the mundane to the political. Being 'tall' or 'skinny', a transgender woman or Asian were listed as singular discrete attributes that defined individuals on a level plane. Intersectionality, then, took on the characteristics of diversity – a framework in which, as Ahmed points out, 'all differences matter' (2012: 14). This is not to suggest that Alice was apolitical; later, Alice also firmly stated her belief that 'the capitalist, white-supremacist patriarch, he needs to make more room for everyone else', politicising these differences and making a direct critique of inequalities in power. I use this example, then, to demonstrate the cultural blurring between intersectionality and diversity even for a feminist who was highly politically oriented and capable of identifying difference in terms of social domination.

By way of contrast, Faiza, an activist and university student of South Asian descent, took a position against intersectionality as a framework for documenting all differences. She told me of a blog post she had written outlining that intersectionality was primarily concerned with the three axes of gender, race and class, rather than all differences:

> if your intersectionality doesn't have – class and – race and gender, and asks, does it have all those three things in it, it's not intersectional. You can have white feminism that has really good queer politics but isn't intersectional because it doesn't talk about race and class. So I think for a lot of people that was like a big [surprise].

Faiza was pleased about the affective impact she had generated in writing this post. She had sought to intervene in what she perceived as a dominant set of presumptions about intersectionality, which tended to favour the sheer possible *range* of women's experiences, pushing intersectionality into a universalist framework of diversity.

These differing accounts of intersectional feminism, then, revealed a set of broadly existing presumptions of intersectionality as a framework as a means of plotting women on an identity grid. On the one axis of 'range', it arranged transgender, tall, skinny, Asian, able-bodied women on a certain plane of common experience. In terms of 'depth', intersectionality was understood as a linear means of measuring disadvantage. Sasha, a white, queer woman, and one of my most committed participants in terms of her continual research on gender and race online, explained the coordinates to me in these terms: 'so if you are a Black transwoman, and working class, you are at the back of the line'. The capacity for an intersectional framework to capture depth in such a way thus was equated in terms of being able to recognise women's experiences in terms of more, or less, privilege.

This intersectional approach was defined in binary opposition to white feminism, which was characterised as a shallow or surface-based feminism. Some participants would suggest this by noting that it was 'easy' to be middle class and white, or by explaining that whiteness meant not always being conscious of privilege. Sophie, a white university student who was highly invested and active in a number of social justice projects, explained a 'white feminist' in the following terms:

> 'I'm a feminist, but I don't want to deal with anything sort of irky. I want to deal with the nice side of feminists'. So I feel as though that's my understanding of what white feminism is. It's literally just ignoring– it's the suffragettes, really . . . everyone thinks that the suffragettes were all great . . . and they were. . . They were ground-breaking for white women . . . [but] it's the ignoring of anyone less privileged than them . . .. that's what my understanding of white feminism is. It's not keeping your privilege in check and understanding that, yes, while you are a woman and you do experience some pretty significant oppressions, someone who is of colour and a woman experiences more.

As such, white feminism, as a position 'on top' of the grid, tended to be used as shorthand to also presume middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender and able-bodied attributes, as a means of predicting a fairly static position of power.

This framework, then, explicitly problematised 'white feminism': a feminism emerging from a white perspective, that positions itself as universal (Aziz, 1997). However, this conceptual oscillation between intersectionality and white feminism as a means of understanding women's experiences tended to align women's differences within a straightforward model where they could be *accounted* for. Aileen Moreton-Robinson observes that whiteness is often seen as an 'epiphenomenon of gender' (2000b: 347) within feminism, anointing gender as the 'quintessential basis' of departure for women's oppression (2000b: 345). Here, then, similar to Rachel E.

Luft and Jane Ward's (2009) research on intersectionality in the non-government sector, intersectionality was dominantly interpreted in terms of added oppressions, providing a means of identifying *the most* disadvantaged women in this grid, rather than interrogating whiteness. Differentiated oppressions took on a fungible and countable quality in terms of units of privilege; in such a way, the impact of differences could be calculated. Intersectionality, then, understood in terms of this gridded framework, promoted a feminist approach classifying and weighing up all non-dominant attributes magnifying disadvantage, in order to prioritise a generalised 'inclusiveness' as a means of remedying it. Such a framework, I suggest, was compelling for my white participants in particular. Although they were sensitive to issues affecting racialised people ranging from Indigenous protests over land to refugee detention, participants expressed conundrums in *knowing how to act* as feminist white women, and this framework, in effect, provided simple, seemingly certain rules that they could follow in shaping their conduct in relation to disadvantaged women.

However, such seeming simplicity obscured the broader politics of the boundaries and categories of difference through which recognition and inclusion could be afforded. There was an unclear correspondence of 'women of colour', the term commonly used by participants, and actual patterns of settler and Indigenous racialisation in Australia. According to Faiza, her white peers held common misconceptions in relation to the 'diverse' subjects they sought to identify:

> the thing is they think they're talking about race but then they're not really . . . and it's also like this idea that all people of colour are the same. It's like well, no, not all people of colour are the same. Some people of colour are Indigenous . . . Some people of colour are middle class and so the racism they face is not the same as the racism that a migrant refugee– like the racism I face is really different to the racism my mum faces because she has an accent and she dresses in Pakistani clothing.

In this way, Faiza drew attention to the *sameness* or fungibility of racialisation in this framework; the notion that difference could be weighed up and exchanged. In this critique, we may observe a clear condemnation of the kinds of simplifications and absences in these everyday understandings of intersectionality.

Another significant aspect of this gridded framework was the positioning of feminism as an introspective, *in-house* political inquiry. There was an implicit premise that intersectionality was a grid used to sort *women* of differing privileges. Following on from Rebecca's initial definition of intersectionality as a means of understanding women's experiences, I asked whether an intersectional analysis could be applied to men. Rebecca responded: 'Oh, definitely, yeah. I'd still apply the same thing to men, but they're always normally white, male from a middle-class family, so it's like a quick analysis'.

Of course, Rebecca knew perfectly well that men displayed as many intra-group differences as women. For example, she was able to discuss racism in a way that was not confined to women's experiences, in observing her family's 'hatred' of

various racialised groups, regardless of gender. More than reflecting Rebecca's own views or the participants more broadly, such a response reflected these presumptions of intersectionality as an internal affair governing privileged women's relations to other women, with intersectionality in relation to men only requiring a straightforward diagnosis of 'privilege'. Implicit were longstanding understandings of feminism as a set of citizenship practices pertaining to an imagined republic or 'nation' of women, in the notions of being 'included' or 'excluded' from feminism. These formulations – or formulas – as to how to apply intersectionality suggested it operated primarily as a framework governing relations *between* women, according to their location on the coordinates of this intersectional grid.

American lessons and Australian problems

While intersectionality, then, attracted significant interest as an *everyday*, bounded framework that could be used by participants to assess, sort and manage women's differences and disadvantages, participants often looked 'outwards' to the USA to guide understanding, shaped by the dominance of US media online and offline. More broadly, the USA was implicitly conflated in the Australian feminist imaginary as a more evolved (and more stratified) context that could be fairly straightforwardly drawn on in terms of local lessons. While Australia is part of a Western imperial network including the USA and Western Europe, it is also situated, as Ien Ang has observed, on the periphery of its Euro-American core, and this relatively marginal status *within* the West 'produces a sense of non-metropolitan, postcolonial whiteness whose structures of feeling remain to be explored' (2003: 201). This sense of whiteness that is contingent upon recognition by a Euro-American core, I suggest, together with the immersion of my participants within the attention cycles of US-based media and digital culture, may constitute part of the reason these national contexts were conflated. Participants such as Sarah, a white administration worker in her thirties, seamlessly moved between their accounts of American and Australian progressive identity: 'I'll get complacent and I'll think we're winning, which is how things like [former Australian prime minister] Tony Abbott and Donald Trump happen. We think that's impossible, that would never happen. I never for a second thought Donald Trump would get in. I was too complacent'. After saying this, Sarah acknowledged that evidently she could not have affected the US political outcome as an Australian. However, US and Australian references continued to be entangled across participants' accounts and explanations of feminist principles.

While there are clear parallels and entanglements in US and Australian identity politics, I note that a focus on US antiracism can produce key differences of perspective in relation to race. According to Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Maryrose Casey and Fiona Nicoll, while scholarship from the USA often begins from the premise of slavery rather than colonisation in its articulation of antiracism, important political work focusing on Australian settler whiteness can raise 'important questions about the ideological processes that enable the USA to

position itself outside of relations of colonization and indigenous dispossession' (2008: x–xi). Indeed, some of my participants discussed what they felt to be a myopia in their immediate feminist communities towards the immediate issues of racism and dispossession faced by Indigenous groups. However, participants like Susie, a feminist activist who was grappling with the recent discovery of her Indigenous heritage and history, centred the importance of Indigenous politics in drawing on US culture. Susie conceptualised the USA and Australia as being on a kind of continuum:

> In a lot of ways, they [Americans] are really progressive and have a better understanding of things like blackface, and that kind of stuff, than we do here in Australia – blackface and cultural appropriation and that, whereas we don't quite get it here. I'm from [a country town] originally. Just two weeks ago, people that I used to play softball with posted photos of themselves just merrily dressed up in blackface for a costume party . . . It's getting more traction and ground now, because people are understanding. Using the examples from the States really highlights more . . . local examples that we have here in Australia.

In Susie's account, US culture was cited to make judgments on what interventions were in needed in local contexts – in this instance, the mainstreaming of knowledge about cultural appropriation as a racist practice. However, a more dominant theme reported in the knowledge derived from US culture was in the domain of feminist identity practices. American women, much more so than Australians, tended to figure strongly on the instructive examples of what *not* to do as a white feminist. This presence of US celebrity culture can be partly explained by participants' immersion in the attention economies of convergent, digital culture, making Hollywood as visible, if not more so, than regional or localised events. For example, Siobhan, a white international relations student, invoked Taylor Swift as a key reference point for explaining white feminism: 'because of how she uses feminism to her advantage and to gain fans rather than actually engaging in any substantial discourse apart from being like "oh, I have a girl group or I have a girl gang" that's predominantly white models'.

Acting for one's own benefit (as a white woman) – and thus scaling further *up* the hierarchy – and being *exclusive* were precisely counter to this gridded model of intersectional feminism that required a certain selflessness emblematic of the 'good white woman' (Sullivan, 2014); a capacity to deal with the 'irky' side of feminism, as Sophie put it. Rebecca referred to celebrities such as Sofia Coppola, Lena Dunham and the Kardashians as exemplars of white feminism, who either appropriated the work of people of colour in their self-branding, or excluded them in their cultural work. Explaining the flaws of the Kardashians, Rebecca explained: 'They [the Kardashians] sort of fetishise men of colour as well, and they also steal a lot from Black culture as well, particular hairstyles and particular accessory pieces as well. Yeah, they just like to appropriate a lot of Black culture . . . So people are just like, stop stealing and commodifying . . . I've not watched *Keeping Up with the*

Kardashians since'. Like Taylor Swift, they were perceived to 'use feminism to their advantage' – demonstrating undesirable personality traits such as self-centredness, vanity and exclusivity. The Kardashians essentially 'stole' difference as an essential property of others. Rebecca similarly suggested that 'people just need to stop being arrogant, I guess, in short ... If everybody just didn't immediately think about themselves and thought [only] from their perspective, they'd learn'.

Such arrogance, then, was characteristically framed through salient examples of celebrity culture in terms of 'stealing', 'speaking for' or 'appropriation'. The practices of Australian feminists could be discussed within these proprietary frameworks of difference. Rebecca explained to me how she understood the insights of African-Australian public figure Yassmin Abdel-Magied in relation to contestations in the field of literature: '[white people] write people of colour's experiences and make money off it and distribute it, even though it's not of quality, even though they've never experienced it. I mean you can do tons of research but you– if you're not a person of colour you don't truly understand their experience *to then write a quality story about it*'. Similar to the Kardashians' faux pas, difference was a property that white people might try to appropriate, but could never do in a 'quality' way that meant such literature deserved a market.

Intersectionality has often been devalued in scholarly contexts because, as King (2015) observes, Black American women's knowledges have been understood as too 'particular', too 'specific', inapplicable to a broader human condition. I draw attention to a slightly different conundrum in these complex negotiations of intersectionality as a travelling concept. Intersectionality was largely accepted by my participants as a universal framework in accounting for difference and guiding conduct. Because of the conceptualisation of intersectionality as a grid that could plot variety and privilege *between women*, the practical implications of intersectionality were discussed in terms of how (white) women, as the presumed ultimate bearers of privilege and custodians of feminism, ought to act in relation to other women. As such, white feminism and intersectional feminism tended to remain positioned as opposing poles of behaviour: 'arrogant' versus 'inclusive'; and practices conceptualised in terms of representation, 'platforming'[1] and (non-) consumption. However, US pop culture as a taken-for-granted reference point raised questions of how it enabled the identification of whiteness and racialisation in local contexts removed from spectacular dynamics of self-representation, branding and promotion.

This also raised questions about the politics of the 'go to' explanations of problematic white femininity being located *elsewhere* (see also: Lewis, 2013), even as intersectionality appeared as an immediately accessible, universal framework. This was revealed in Rebecca's off-the-cuff evaluation of 'American female feminists' as being 'quite into their own privilege'. She stated this as the reason that she had decided to mostly 'unfollow' American feminists on social media and in their media production. This positioning of problematic whiteness elsewhere, or as simply being absent from analysis, is the continuing problem that Moreton-Robinson (2000a) identifies as the longstanding failure of white Australian

feminism to take account of and interrogate its whiteness. Cultural difference continues to be understood as ‘other’, doing little to disrupt the unnamed and invisible position of middle-class whiteness within feminism. And importantly, Moreton-Robinson argues that this misrecognises what Indigenous women *want*: ‘Indigenous women do not necessary want to be “included” in white feminism; they do not want to be white’ (2000a: 174).

One of the primary effects of utilising this gridded, governmental framework of intersectionality, then, was that intersectionality materialised as a framework dictating how relations between women ought to be structured. My participants were quick to acknowledge that understanding intersectionality required the knowledge and identification of ‘bad’ practice. Yet, the mediated texture of intersectional feminism accessed by young feminists in the contemporary moment lent itself to a translation that privileged personal identity and representation in quite abstract ways. Intersectionality often remained ‘theoretical’ – based in declaration, citation and the circulation of knowledges of flaws and missteps. For example, Faiza was aggrieved by the lack of intersectional practice by white Australian feminists she knew. While she was critical of the conflation of intersectionality with ‘inclusion’, she argued that even in this form, her peers did not deliver. Intersectionality as theory was not translated into embodied practice:

> people preach about intersectionality and they’ll say a lot of stuff about it but then they don’t ever deliver. Like our women’s collective talks about intersectionality but then doesn’t deliver ever. Like there are women in that collective that look *physically uncomfortable* around women who have migrants’ accents and that makes me really uncomfortable and it’s like... you’ve claimed this word but then you’re not actually practising it and they’re actually kind of doing the opposite.

Rose, a white artist in her sixties, spoke in similar terms about a feminist group in which she was involved: ‘They’re really happy to call themselves intersectional, but they don’t actually do anything about it. They just use it as a label to say they therefore don’t have– they’re almost denying their own white, middle-class, well-off privilege because they’re intersectional’. The practice of intersectionality, materialising as the knowing *citation* of good and bad practice in celebrity culture, did not necessarily provide the tools to enact ‘inclusion’ on the ground. Rather, such practices of citation, according to Faiza and Rose, tended to work in a declarative fashion similar to the effects that Sara Ahmed observes in her critique of the ‘non-performativity of antiracism’, where she reminds us that declarations do not always do what they purport. The declaration of shame in relation to racism, for example, may work in a circular motion to exempt the white subject who makes such a declaration from ‘bad’ whiteness and thus restore them to the status of good, white citizen even as the conditions of racism continue (Ahmed, 2004). Similarly, an institutional statement of commitment to diversity may produce organisational pride while failing to actually ‘commit’ the institution to any kind of action (Ahmed, 2012).

The moral legitimacy and power of whiteness may remain undisrupted when intersectionality and antiracism more generally are transformed into an abstract guide to conduct that may be cited by certain knowing subjects. Such declarative materialisations, then, in intersectionality's travels, echo the ways in which the articulation of principles such as 'tolerance' (Hage, 1998), 'empathy' (Pedwell, 2014) and 'inclusiveness' may reinforce existing inequalities of power. If feminism is conceptualised as an inward-looking, bounded 'nation' of women, the question arises of whether these conceptualisations of intersectionality interrupt existing roles of who includes, and who is to be *included*, within feminism. Who remains the 'host', and who remains the 'guest' (cf. Hage, 1998)?

Conclusion

In concluding, I want to make clear that I am not suggesting a lack of care, or effort, across my participants, who showed a keen interest in actively doing a feminism that was attentive to difference. Their feminist commitments involved regular unpaid labour: from donating and volunteering regularly at shelters and doing tampon drives for homeless women, to volunteering in local politics and actively intervening in sexism on social media. But as a travelling theory, I have suggested that the circulation of intersectionality via digital culture lent itself to an everyday take-up that was simultaneously abstract, universalised, as well as individualised for my white participants in particular. This classificatory, governmental framework of intersectionality offered seemingly clear imperatives to account for women's differences, avoid 'arrogance' and act benevolently; and yet, it provided a lens for envisioning problematic white femininity mainly elsewhere, rather than a tool for seeing the whiteness of everyday practices. In exploring this everyday retheorisation, I have sought to emphasise the structuring mechanisms through which it is made legible: through cultures and practices of whiteness, discourses of diversity and the dynamics of digital culture. Without interrogation of such conditions, intersectionality may be too quickly misinterpreted as resurrecting liberal humanist frameworks in which marginalisation is addressed through inclusion and normalisation.

Both 'popular' and 'academic' feminisms are intertwined terrains of struggle, and I have accordingly framed this article in terms of the *retheorisation* of intersectionality to draw on scholars such as Ahmed (2004), Bailey and Trudy (2018), Lewis (2013) and King (2015) who have shown that the *visibility* of, or even the *citation* of ideas about, race do not necessarily translate into transformation. Like academic cultures, digital cultures are not simply geared towards 'action' or 'implementation' but are framed around learning and the continual renovation of knowledge, shown through the student-like approaches of many of my feminist participants. On both (intertwined) terrains, theories of race and notionally antiracist ideas may be frequently cited but are left untransformed as 'unhappy performatives' (Ahmed, 2004), failing to do what they say they will do. In the accounts I have explored, the seemingly common-sense ways of practising

intersectionality ('don't be like Lena Dunham') were often too abstract and atomised – disconnected from the interrogation of practices of white tolerance in the immediate cultural context of Australian settler-colonial multiculturalism. As intersectionality is incorporated within discourses of 'inclusivity' and 'diversity' in its mediated circulation, the question remains of how to move from its characterisation as a framework based primarily on inclusion, and the recognition and acknowledgment of minoritised subjects, to disassembling existing centres of power.

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Note

1. Platforming is colloquially referred to as a practice whereby an individual uses their 'platform', such as their social media account, or use of a public space, to promote another's point of view. See also Kanai (2020) and Tarleton Gillespie's (2010) discussion of the associational politics of platforms as 'neutral', flat and empowering.

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