Feeling Black Feminism, Otherwise: a Review of Jennifer C. Nash's *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019)

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Jennifer Nash's new book opens by quoting a handful of opinion pieces from 2016 and 2017 that lambasted the concept of intersectionality, reducing the analytic to a symptom of the larger disease of "wokeness" that conservative thinkers imagine as fundamentally destroying United States institutions. Critiques of intersectionality and identity politics have continued to proliferate in right-wing media in recent years. In the midst of the turbulent political climate of 2020, the Trump administration released new guidelines for organizations receiving government funding, including universities, which forbid discussion of critical race theory, furthering the narrative that regards values of inclusion and equity as dangerous. The backlash against intersectionality in some spaces comes as it has become more and more "ubiquitous" in others.

Black Feminism Re-Imagined: After Intersectionality is Jennifer Nash's second academic monograph. In *Black Feminism, Re-Imagined*, Nash builds upon work on black feminism and intersectionality that she has been doing for more than a decade. Nash's first book, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, looked to representations of black women in golden age pornography as a potential site to locate black women's sexual pleasure and furthermore to reclaim the possibilities of racialized sexual desire and pleasure for the figure of the black woman. That project intervened in black feminist theory's tendency to regard all visual representation as the site of harm as well as debates within feminist theory about sexual politics and pornography in particular. In her second book, Nash is again exploring limiting and potentially harmful tendencies in black feminism. What is re-imagined in this new book is the place of intersectionality within black feminism, women's studies, and the larger university.

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Nash's latest book arrives at a moment when black feminism seems to have gone mainstream. A term that emerged in the academic field of critical race theory has traveled not just, as Nash notes, to other fields and beyond its original subject of the black woman but is also now part of popular discourse on social media sites like Tumblr and Twitter. Signs at women's marches over the last 4 years have repeatedly featured the slogan "It's not feminism if it's not intersectional" and "Feminism without intersectionality is just white supremacy." As the analytic has become more popular and obtained the "citational ubiquity" that, in part, inspired Nash's book, it has become part of the assemblage of ideals associated with wokeness, a radical, inclusive, liberal politics that is associated with Generation Z and which is regularly derided by conservative pundits and politicians.

At the same time, this explosion of interest in intersectionality has produced new volumes that seek to fix the definition of the analytic almost three decades after it was first named. These volumes demonstrate how interest (positive or negative) in intersectionality belies the ongoing debates about the "true" definition and proper use of the concept. Sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge recently published a volume simply titled "Intersectionality" as part of Polity's Key Concepts series. A forthcoming collection from Kimberlé Crenshaw, "On Intersectionality: Essential Writings," lays claim to the analytic simply through its title. A brief survey of book catalogs reveals other monographs and numerous anthologies devoted to the role of intersectionality in particular disciplines or fields as far apart as higher education, psychoanalysis, and ancient history.

As someone whose research and teaching straddles the fields of black studies and women's studies, that lives at the site where, as Nash writes, these two disciplines "touch," I cannot help but see how the debates she traces show up in my classroom. Today, I am both thrilled and also frustrated by the students who come to my classroom with some idea of what black feminism is. Unlike other scholars, such as Brittney Cooper, who have found their declaration of themselves as "black feminist theorists" met with confusion, my students seem to know (or believe they know) what that phrase means. Most of them have encountered intersectionality, what Nash identifies as black feminism's primary contribution to the field of women's studies, long before they step foot in my classroom. And they have, fascinatingly, encountered it entirely outside of the university and the attendant academic discourses in which Nash is interested. Instead, they have come to know it as part of what one of my good friends has called "Tumblr feminism"—a version mediated through popular culture, especially social media, that claims to represent "good" politics, wokeness. But what they think they know about intersectionality is frequently quite different from what black feminist theorists themselves have actually argued. As a result, I spend a large part of my "black feminisms" seminar attempting to reorient them toward actual arguments and definitions rather than memeified glosses of the concept.

The way I teach the intellectual history of black feminism in general and intersectionality in particular is through a capacious intellectual genealogy of black women's theorizing about their complex identities and experiences in the U.S. I begin with the speeches and writings of nineteenth century African American women including Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper. Then, there is a sort of gap after the 1920s that overlaps with the nadir of African American literature. My syllabus picks back up with Pauli Murray's coining of "Jane Crow" in the 1950s and discourses on

race and gender in the New Left. Then, we turn to Fran Beale's "Double Jeopardy" as the earliest "second-wave" articulation of black women's simultaneous race and gendered oppression, followed by the Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" from 1977. Then comes Deborah King's rebuttal, "Triple Jeopardy," in the 1980s, which revises Beale's formulation. This genealogy culminates in the 1990s with Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination" and Crenshaw's groundbreaking essay "Mapping the Margins," in which she first used the term "intersectionality." My syllabus emphasizes the always-already-ness of intersectionality and the refinement and evolution of the concept over more than a century.

Nash distinguishes between genealogies like mine and "origin stories" of intersectionality that assert "a coherent, legible origin, describing a particular moment of intersectionality's creation" (39). These stories, Nash argues, (1) seek to reclaim intersectionality from women's studies, which has "whitened" the analytic, and place it firmly back within black feminist thought, and (2) reflect "debates internal to black feminism about who coined the term, who is its inaugural scholar" (39). The central message in both cases is that intersectionality has always "belonged" to black feminists and that its proper object is black women. Deviations from this formulation are thus incomplete, at best, or willfully obtuse, at worst. Nash argues that these debates about intersectionality's origins are more than disagreements about intellectual histories, rather, as Nash demonstrates, they reflect larger anxieties about disciplinary boundaries and the place of black feminism and black women in the academy. In both of these formulations, Nash sees examples of what she terms the black feminist project of "defensiveness" that treats intersectionality as "property," "as terrain that has been gentrified, colonized, and appropriated" (3).

One of *Black Feminism Re-Imagined's* major contributions is the mapping of academic discourses around intersectionality. Nash traces the contours of what she calls the "intersectionality wars" in the academy over the last three decades. Like the feminist "sex wars" of the 1980s, the intersectionality wars are characterized by debates about harm. Nash writes, "debates about intersectionality all too quickly become referendums on whether scholars are 'for' or 'against' intersectionality (rather than attempts to refine, nuance, complicate, or even think through intersectionality's contours and migrations.) And debates about whether one is 'for' or 'against' intersectionality almost always seem to become referendums on whether one is 'for' or 'against' black feminism, and perhaps 'for' or 'against' black woman herself" (36). It is this cascade of "slippages" that "animate the intersectionality wars because they ensure that discussing intersectionality's critical limits is always already to debate racial politics and allegiances" (36).

While the feminist sex wars are generally synonymous with or embodied by controversies at the 1982 Barnard conference on sexuality, the intersectionality wars do not have a similar flashpoint. Instead, supposed assaults on the analytic are imagined as constant and unrelenting. In order to capture and theorize this feeling of intersectionality's constant "vulnerability," Nash draws upon affect studies. Affect studies, popularized in literary and cultural studies over the last two decades by critics like Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Ann Cvetkovich, and Sara Ahmed, seek to interpret the world not through arguments but according to feelings. Affects studies regard the so-called affective attachments and structures of feeling as laden with political

meaning. Nash draws on work on negative affect by Berlant and Ngai to theorize black feminists' investment in intersectionality and to "imagine black feminism [itself] as an affective project—a felt experience—as much as it is an intellectual, theoretical, creative, political, and spiritual tradition" (2–3). It is within her argument about the "felt life" of black feminism that Nash posits "defensiveness" as the primary affect animating black feminists' engagement with intersectionality. This claim is both the book's most compelling and also the most uncomfortable one for some readers.

In the decades since Crenshaw first coined the term, intersectionality has proliferated across fields and genres. Although most of my undergraduate students seem to first encounter the analytic on social media, intersectionality has been picked up by scholars across academic disciplines, some far afield from its origins in critical race theory and women's studies. The analytic's travels have led to critiques of the analytic and novel applications of it. Both of these have been met by what Nash calls a "posture of defensiveness." Nash argues defensiveness is "single affect that has come to mark contemporary academic black feminist practice" (3). Nash "treat[s] black feminist defensiveness as manifested most explicitly through black feminism's proprietary attachments to intersectionality" (3). Furthermore, she argues that the stance of defensiveness is an exercise in what Berlant calls "obstructive agency." Although policing the boundaries and deployment of intersectionality may give black feminists feelings of control and security in the face of their field's putative vulnerability, their attempts to protect or rescue intersectionality are ultimately unsuccessful, stymieing their intellectual projects and restricting the analytic rather than preventing its destruction.

The first half of the book is devoted to tracing and analyzing what Nash calls black feminists' desire to "hold on" to intersectionality. She deftly reads scholarship, journal calls, and conference agendas for instances of this proprietary feeling toward the analytic. Nash demonstrates how "defenders" of intersectionality have repeatedly used language of colonization and property that would seem at odds with the political investments of black feminism. Defensiveness is alluring because it is supposedly righteous. And thus, it is through the work of defending intersectionality, what Nash calls "corrective labor," "that defensiveness garners its affective and political charge; it offers the promise of speaking on behalf of black women, black women's intellectual production, and black feminism in the face of critical practice that is imagined to efface black women" (40). In this imagined dynamic, the defenders of intersectionality are engaged in "a practice of justice" (45). This depiction of the defenders of intersectionality as righteous necessarily indicts those who would seek to do intersectionality "wrong" or to critique it. Nash writes, "the language used to describe and capture the violence performed by intersectionality's critics—disappearing, commodification, colonization, and 'train wrecks'—suggests that criticism is a violent practice" (38).

This skepticism of critics and critiques has in some ways extended to Nash's study of them within the book. Prior to the book's release, I had a conversation with a black feminist colleague about it. I was surprised when she responded with resistance. She did not want to read the book, would not read the book, and wholesale rejected the idea that it could have any useful or redeeming contribution. Having attended a talk Nash gave that was drawn from the book, she had heard enough to

draw a conclusion: Nash did not care about black feminists or black feminism. At the time, I was shocked but I now imagine that this reaction was not unique. Although these types of reactions are based on an insufficient and ungenerous understanding of Nash's argument, on the surface, this reluctance rings true: What is wrong with having an intense, affective attachment to intersectionality? What could be harmful about black women, for once, laying claim to their own intellectual terrain, defending it against naysayers and interlopers? I realize now that the book Nash has written is perhaps not that book the others would have liked Nash to write.

Nash is not interested in defending intersectionality or reclaiming it. She instead seeks to unsettle attachments to the analytic and reveal how these attachments are, in fact, stymieing the field and the analytic itself. In one chapter, Nash recounts an occasion when during a panel, a fellow black woman academic stated that the travel of intersectionality within the academy reminded her of a monologue from Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls*...: "Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff." In a world where "somebody had walked off with all our [our] stuff," black women scholars are resistant to losing what little ground they have carved out for themselves, what we have managed to, as Nash argues, "hold on" to. One of the major contributions of Nash's book is her analysis of this "holding on" and how it, forgive the wordplay, holds back the analytic and the field from growth.

Where Nash's excellent book especially excels is in its careful (both as in fastidious and as in caring) analysis of these phenomena. Nash has anticipated and likely already seen many negative reactions to her claims and, to her credit, she is not deterred by them. In this review, I find myself endeavoring to treat this book with care in part as a response to Nash's own careful and *loving* treatment of the material. As a black feminist herself, Nash is explicit about locating her own experiences and work within the history she analyzes. Most interesting is the chapter where she uses her own categorization as a "critic of intersectionality" as the jumping off point for an inquiry into how black feminist defensiveness has responded to any work that does not lay claim to the analytic and protect it in certain ways. Nash observes that although her work on intersectionality has been labeled "critical," it is nonetheless depicted as loving rather than destructive, likely because she and others understand her to be a black feminist. Others' critiques of the analytic have not been met with such generosity. Nash reveals how Jasbir Puar is imagined as the quintessential critic of intersectionality but is also the only critic of the analytic who is ever explicitly identified. Nash sees these reactions to Puar's work on intersectionality as a direct result of the black feminist posture of defensiveness. Because Puar is a non-black woman of color, she is effectively imagined as an outsider to black feminism and thus necessarily a danger to the field.

Nash's analysis reveals that only some "critics" are treated as actual critics, in that their work on intersectionality is regarded as violent and destructive. This contradiction reveals that the supposed vulnerability of intersectionality is a largely a fiction. She writes, "I seek to suggest that black feminists produce the critic rather than expose the critic...The figure of the critic is, then, an imaginative projection of black feminist defensiveness, a figure that animates and justifies the defensive affect even as that figure is a fantasy, rather than an actual threat" (56). With this claim, as with many in the book, Nash potentially indicts

her reader, but Nash's writing style and her own capacious theorizing deliver her points not as accusations but as provocations: Why are you so attached to intersectionality in a particular form? Why must it be protected? What could be gained if we treated all "critics" with generosity? In asking these questions, Nash also pushes her reader (and the larger U.S. academy) to find alternative ways to engage with intersectionality and critiques of it. Nash sidesteps questions of the correct attribution, history, and use of intersectionality and instead is invested in why these narratives are so attractive to black feminists. What investments do they shore up and why does it matter? She writes, "If the tradition [black feminism] is designed merely to correct, rather than to exist as its own vibrant field of debate, then it is logical that black feminists find themselves mired in the impasse of the present, one marked by the intersectionality wars that again attempt to tether black feminism to one intellectual product—intersectionality—and to reduce and collapse 'black woman,' 'black feminism,' and 'intersectionality'" (57).

In chapter 2, Nash explores "how black feminists have imagined 'good' reading practices as guarding intersectionality from misuse as tactics of care" (59). She notes that care operates in two ways in the intersectionality wars, as both textual fidelity and as love politics, caring for the analytic, protecting it from the aforementioned critics. What Nash called a "politics of reading" is an "affectively saturated rhetorical strategy, one that conflates the survival (or even thriving) of black women's bodies with intersectionality as an object of study and a method of analysis" (60). She explores what care and careful reading actually mean to black feminists and argues that these practices, rather than "rescuing" intersectionality, actually trap the analytic and black feminists in stasis. The obstructive agency demonstrated by black feminists' engagement with "critics" of intersectionality persists in these reading practices. Rather than glean the "true" interpretation of intersectionality from rigorous, careful reading of Crenshaw's foundational works, "the very practices that champion textual fidelity actually emphasize certain aspects of intersectionality and downplay others, often to make the analytic resilient in the face of new 'critiques' and new trends in the humanities and social sciences" (69). Rather than protecting black women's intellectual property, as it claims, this version of intersectionality, ultimately and ironically, removes black women from the center of the analytic.

But, if current methods of feeling black feminism result, as Nash argues, in pernicious attachments to the analytic as property that ultimately leaves black feminism and black feminists at an impasse, what are we to do? How can we move out of this model that restrains rather than frees us? In the second half of the book, Nash proposes alternatives to the obstructed agency of black feminist defensiveness. Elsewhere, Nash has written about the love politics of black feminism; her book is those politics in action. Having established that many so-called black feminist practices of care that are "often imagined as radical but actually reinscribe the logics of property and the attendant affects of defensive holding on they attempt to sidestep," Nash seeks to "reanimate [care], asking how we might display our care—our affection, our regard, our love, even—for intersectionality differently, in ways that exceed the deep pull of property" (61; 80). If these proprietary approaches to intersectionality hold back both black feminism as a field and the black and other women of color who, as Nash shows, are frequently imagined as synonymous with the analytic, her

project in the second half of the book is to plot other ways for these groups to relate to and engage with the analytic.

Nash identifies two ways of “letting go” and feeling black feminism otherwise, the first of which is surrender. To surrender intersectionality would be to give up “its territorial hold to intersectionality and permit the analytic to move untethered from the imagined specificity of black woman” (83). She writes, “I treat a black feminist surrender of intersectionality *not* as a form of ‘defeat’ but as the beginning of reimagining black feminism’s theoretical and political life, as a deep act of generosity that unleashes connections between black feminism and women of color feminism, enabling black feminism to imagine itself otherwise” (84). In order to imagine the possibilities produced by surrendering intersectionality, Nash turns to another “buzzword” in women’s studies: transnational. She traces the history of the two analytics within women’s studies. Both are imagined as “correctives” to women’s studies and white feminism’s failings. Though both terms are understood as performing similar types of work for the field, they are imagined as entirely separate and, in fact, as competing against each other for limited resources (103). The surrender of intersectionality, “locates political promise in a revitalized intimacy and even promiscuity among the intellectual and political work of black woman and woman of color, or intersectionality and transnationalism. It is this radical intimacy, a letting go of what we think intersectionality must do, that will compel women’s studies to tell a different story about what black feminist theory can do” (110). The surrender of territoriality and embrace of “a black feminist theoretical and affective stance that thinks expansively about who intersectionality can describe and analyze, and generously about the overlaps between black woman and woman of color,” also rejects harmful prevailing narratives about intersectionality (and black woman and woman of color’s) place in women’s studies (110).

The second route that Nash proposes out of black feminist defensiveness and the mire of the intersectionality wars is a return to the analytic’s roots in law. Intersectionality’s roots in law are largely forgotten or disavowed by black feminists as the law and the state have become regarded by certain critics as only ever sites of violence. Nash encourages “a letting go of presumptions about the state, about law as *the* location of black death, and about radical politics as necessarily requiring an antistate vision” (114, emphasis in original). She writes, “Treating intersectionality as an analytic that mandates a different way of engaging the state offers black feminism—and black feminists—the chance to cultivate new affective engagements with the state and the chance to ask (or even demand) that the state feel and act differently toward black women” (114). Intersectionality’s ability to engage the state “otherwise,” reimagines law as a site of black feminist “love-politics” instead of one of death.

Nash returns to the imagery from Crenshaw’s foundational essay on intersectionality as an example of the analytic’s powerful love-politics. In the basement metaphor of intersectionality, Crenshaw illustrates the failures of single-axis frameworks of discrimination. Those who are marginalized along one axis can, when that marginalization is addressed, get out of the proverbial basement, but those same remedies cannot address the injuries of those who are multiply marginalized, leaving them stuck. Attending to the less popular of Crenshaw’s two spatial metaphors reveals that intersectionality is “a tactic of making visible black women’s status as

witnesses who can name and describe the basement, which it not merely a social location but a space produced by law's doctrinal failures" (127). As such, Nash argues, the analytic "advocates for tailoring law to address injuries in particular ways" and "offers a vision of law that is rooted in flexibility and customization, in responding to particular lived experience" (127). It is intersectionality's emphasis on witnessing and vulnerability that make it part of black feminist love politics; it reshapes the law to make visible and remediable what otherwise might be hidden.

In the coda, Nash reflects that "letting go" and doing black feminism "otherwise," without the obstructed agency of the intersectionality wars, is "a practice of freedom" (138). I want to end this review by meditating on how a "radical black feminist letting go" of intersectionality can also "unleash" black feminists and black woman because of the slippages between black feminism, black woman, and intersectionality that she traces throughout the book. While discussing the similarities between intersectionality and transnationalism, she writes, "each [analytic] has been tethered to particular racially marked bodies that are imagined both to perform the analytic and to be the subject of the analytic's work. In other words, intersectionality and transnationalism are imagined not merely as analytics based on race but as racial embodiments" (97). Because there is an assumed equivalence between both analytics, their objects of study, and the scholars who utilize and study them, disrupting this linkage does not just free the analytics themselves; those subjects and groups who have held in place by their association with these analytics are also set free. Nash's project imagines not just other ways for intersectionality to be, but also frees up space for black women and women of color academics to be *otherwise*. By creating some space between the attendant parts, this move decouples black women and other women of color from the type of diversity labor they are so often presumed (or conscripted) to do for their fields and the university at large (98). Similarly, her argument about the law's attention to vulnerability and witnessing attempts to free black feminism and black woman from the inevitable obsolescence to which their imagined status as "corrective tools" consigns them. Whether the way out is through letting go of intersectionality, returning to the law as a site of love-politics, or some other unnamed strategy, the outcome is the possibility of new, exciting, and generative iterations of black feminism, which otherwise would not exist.

Part of this unleashing of black feminism is also a result of Nash's claim that anyone can be a black feminist or a black feminist theorist. Her "conception of black feminism... is expansive, welcoming anyone with an investment in black women's humanity, intellectual labor, and political visionary work, anyone with an investment in theorizing black genders and sexualities in complex and nuance ways" (5). This stance eschews questions of identity or authenticity in favor of shared investments in particular political projects. Doing so orients it back toward its most fruitful potential: helping us see how power works on marginalized individuals and populations according to social forces. Moving away from a posture of defensiveness underwritten by ideas of ownership allows to "unleash" the analytic's capacity to transform institutions. This is unsurprising as throughout the book, Nash exhibits a deep analysis of the university and its disciplines as institutions that shape the flow and formation of knowledge. Her attention to how women's studies as a field creates and is implicated in the intersectionality wars is a much-needed contribution to

multiple fields. Nash moves us beyond “Women’s Studies is racist” to how attempts to address this assertion have resulted in new forms of tokenization and displacement of marginalized subjects, in particular women of color.

The economic fallout from the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in hiring freezes across the vast majority of colleges and universities and also led to an intensification of trends of redundancy and adjunctification in the U.S. academy. But 6 months of austerity at US institutions of higher education has quickly been followed by a sudden influx of “diversity” cluster hires in the fall and winter. The vague descriptions of the themes of these group hires include terms like “racial inequality,” “race and racism,” “anti-racism,” and “social problems” intended to signal institutional (re)commitment to addressing historical issues exclusion in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement also, within the labor market of the U.S. university, signal the desire to hire particular types of bodies. In these job calls, scholars become equated with their objects of study and their methods and are depicted as interchangeable. Nash’s book helps us understand the disciplinary and institutional histories that create these slippages and gives us tools to push back against trends in the university that impede the actual practices of freedom that could help us to imagine and make our world otherwise. *Black Feminism Reimagined* is an urgent and necessary read for any interested in intersectionality, women’s studies, or supposed diversity projects within the US university.

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