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Preface to Intersectionality & Higher Education: Theory, Research, & Praxis

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Preface

DONALD “DJ” MITCHELL, JR.

For a majority of my life I thought I held anti-racist views, but unfortunately, I did not. I thought being an African American man who experiences racism the United States of America and who openly voices my concerns against racism was enough. It was not until I was introduced to the term *intersectionality*, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, that I began to realize the limitation of my views on race and racism and truly started to become equity-minded and an advocate for moving further towards social justice. Crenshaw, a legal, critical race, and Black feminist legal scholar, first used the term intersectionality to highlight the lived experiences of Black women who, because of the intersection of race and gender are exposed to overlapping forms of oppression and marginalization, and are often theoretically erased from single-axis anti-discrimination laws (e.g., anti-racist laws, anti-sexist laws).

Crenshaw (1989) noted that Black women are not oppressed by *just* racism or *just* sexism since their lived experiences cannot be captured by simply stating that they are Black *or* they are women. On one hand, speaking about Black women in terms of race and racism ignores gender and sexism. On the other hand, speaking about Black women in terms of gender and sexism ignores race and racism. For Black women in particular, by highlighting marginalization or oppression in single-axis ways, they are erased in the process because their experiences as Black women (not Black *and* woman) are not fully acknowledged; and more importantly, the overlapping nature of racism and sexism as oppressive forces marginalizes them in unique ways (Crenshaw, 2015). In addition to race and gender, Black women also face other forms of oppression such as classism, heterosexism, and

transphobia which lead to further marginalization and erasures. What Crenshaw's work taught me is that I was not anti-racist because I was not as, or at all, invested in fights against sexism, classism, heterosexism, transphobia/genderism, and xenophobia among other forms of oppression; and ultimately, one has to be invested in the fight against all -isms to truly be anti-racist since people of Color are heterogeneous and are often oppressed in multiple ways beyond racism and those ways overlap for those from multiple marginalized identities.

As another example, I often reference Susan B. Anthony who is considered one of the greatest feminists in United States history. Anthony is infamously known for stating, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman." In her quote, Anthony uses a single-axis approach to combating sexism while erasing Black women in the process by noting she would cut off her hand before advocating for voting rights for "the Negro" (which meant Black men at the time). Ultimately, while Anthony fought against sexism against White women, she oppressed Black women in the process by speaking against "the Negro." While many argue Anthony was a feminist, as defined as advocating for equality among the sexes or for women's rights, I argue against that claim since she communicated racist views or did not use an intersectional approach to her feminism; this highlights the constant fight for Black women to be seen, heard, and acknowledged, and what is often articulated in Black feminist thought (see Collins, 2000 for more on Black feminist thought).

While Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality was my primary introduction to recognizing overlapping systems of oppression, Black women in the United States have written and spoken about their experiences and the ways they have been uniquely oppressed since the 19th century. Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Bonnie Thornton Dill are some of these pioneers, and while intersectionality as articulated by Crenshaw is the focus of this text, their works must be acknowledged as intersectionality is further theorized and applied in new ways. Failing to recognize intersectionality has some roots in Black feminist thought is exactly what intersectionality originally articulates—Black women's erasure.

Still, while intersectionality as articulated by Crenshaw has some roots in Black feminist thought, the concept is now used to discuss overlapping systems of oppression that influence populations beyond Black women and is used in diverse ways. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) noted intersectionality is now engaged in three primary ways: (1) as a frame of analysis for research and teaching; (2) as a theory or methodology, which includes the ways in which intersectionality has been developed and adapted; and, (3) through intersectional praxis or interventions since intersectionality was never meant to be solely theoretical. Intersectionality has also been adopted "in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and

legal studies” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 787), and more recently, the field of higher education (e.g., see Griffin & Museus, 2011; Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014; Stewart, 2010, 2013). This second edition of *Intersectionality & Higher Education: Theory, Research, & Praxis* seeks to further document the uses of intersectionality specifically within higher education contexts.

I argue using Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality might be the most appropriate ways to shape higher education contexts in the future, particularly given the ways in which higher education of all forms shape societies across the globe. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) note that some scholars argue centering Black women or the origins of intersectionality limit the applicability intersectionality. I contend just the opposite since intersectionality is not solely about multiple, intersecting identities; intersectionality is about overlapping systems of oppression and how those with multiple marginalized identities are made vulnerable in the process (Crenshaw, 2015). Similarly, Jones (2014) notes,

To only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power ... intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

Given this, intersectionality as a framework can, and I argue should, be used to articulate the experiences of people beyond Black women, and given this, my working definition for intersectionality is “the intersection of salient socially constructed identities and the extent to which individuals or groups are oppressed or marginalized as a result of interlocking, socially constructed systems of oppression associated with those identities” (Mitchell, 2014, para. 2) which highlights its capacity for broader use. I also recognize there are those who argue the intersections of race and gender must be present in intersectional analyses given Crenshaw’s original use of the term.

Further, since using intersectionality as a framework requires centering those who are the most marginalized or oppressed, those who are “singularly disadvantaged” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167) also benefit from dismantling multiple oppressions. For example, in a blog I wrote about using intersectionality as a framework for student success, I asked the following to highlight various forms of marginalization for students attending U.S. higher education institutions:

In what ways does having advising hours only during business hours marginalize some students?

In what ways do requiring multiple books for a class and the prices of books marginalize some students?

In what ways do limited or no gender-neutral restrooms marginalize some students?

In what ways does closing housing during Christian religious holiday breaks marginalize some students? (Mitchell, 2016, para. 4)

I should have also asked, "What about the students who experience all of these marginalizations simultaneously?" By centering those students who deal with all of these oppressive policies and seeking to dismantle the various forms of institutional oppressions they face, it also benefits students who deal with one or some of these marginalizing practices. That is the potential power of using intersectionality to improve higher education across the globe.

Just as in the first edition of *Intersectionality & Higher Education*, this edition is organized in three sections: theory, research, and praxis. While some of the chapters from the first edition of the text are included in the present edition, this updated edition includes new pieces articulating and applying intersectionality while ensuring attention to the origins of intersectionality are aptly acknowledged and applied. Still, as Bowleg (2008), McCall (2005), and Stewart (2010) all note, conducting research and scholarship on intersectionality is not easy; "scholars and practitioners must view [scholarly works] as living documents that are fallible and open to correction and revision" (Stewart, 2010, p. 305). Perhaps echoing Stewart, I encourage readers to read these chapters, not just as intersectionally-focused and social justice-centered, but also as snapshots of where authors are in their current understandings and applications of intersectionality recognizing that their understandings and applications could shift later on. My understanding of intersectionality has definitely shifted since the first edition of this text and, as a result, my editorial approach to the second addition was much different; however, I am thankful for this shift, and as a result, I am able to co-present to readers, *Intersectionality & Higher Education: Theory, Research, and Praxis* (2nd ed.).

Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality pushed me to grow and to acknowledge that systems of oppression overlap and not acknowledging these overlaps erases. Still, me changing as an individual is not enough since intersectionality is not about individuals; systemic and societal changes are the changes that are most important, and this is where I hope this text makes a contribution by using intersectionality as the frame of reference. Higher education institutions across the globe are becoming more diverse; nevertheless, those who inhabit higher education institutions are being erased by overlapping systems of oppression that are often operationalized through marginalizing and oppressive structures, policies, practices and campus cultures. The collection of chapters presented in this volume are presented to move us further from this erasure. As Crenshaw (2015) noted, "We simply do not have the luxury of building social movements that are not intersectional, nor can we believe we are doing intersectional work just by saying words" (para. 12). The purpose of this text is to move us as global citizens, educators, and change agents toward social justice using intersectionality as a guide.

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