

Enough with Intersectionality!

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I've heard and used the term intersectionality for decades. I give props to Kimberlè Crenshaw for coining the term, and I'm in awe of how it beautifully describes the multi-locational lived experiences of Black women, for example. However, I've become exhausted by its overuse and appropriation by those who don't plumb its depth and goals and seem to think it's a radical new word for describing how au courant they are. Get over yourself!

Every human being has multiple intersectional identities. If you're in the process of discovering what yours are, great, but don't overly burden the rest of us with your ah-ha moments of self-awareness. Likely we saw more in you than you saw in yourself, long before you noticed our presence. That's like proving you know how to tie your shoes. It's great for you but doesn't mean a whole lot to me unless I choose to help you up off the floor when you trip over your untied shoelaces.

Intersectionality is apparently the new buzz word among folks just now waking up to the ever-present, never-disappeared, always deadly threat of white supremacy in the U.S. that is so unabashedly naked in the Trump Era. Some people feverishly seek their own marginalized social locations to separate themselves from toxic whiteness, misogynistic maleness, or privileged U.S. citizenship. Black women have heard it all: "I don't have white privilege – I was poor!" "I can't be an oppressor; I'm a rape survivor." "I am gay (or lesbian, or bi, or trans, or gender-non-conforming, so I can't be racist!" "I don't hate immigrants – my parents (or great-whatever) were immigrants!" "I have a Black mother, so I can't hate Black women!" "I've had same-sex relationships, so I can't be homophobic!" "I get discriminated against too because...."

I have news for such folks: Every marginalized social location does not provide proven analytical insights into how to deconstruct white supremacy, or detect its internalized and intersectionalized manifestations. Appropriating and over-using the concept of intersectionality is one of those instances. Announcing your intersectional identities is like declaring that you're a human being. I tend to take that for granted. The problem is that my own humanity as a Black female-embodied person is NOT taken for granted by a white supremacist society. Are you confused by the existential difference between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter? Working on intersectionality is not a substitute for actively joining the fight against white supremacy in its legal and extralegal forms. Did you think America was great until Trump got elected? Do you think genocide is something that only happened to Jewish people in Europe during World War II and not the slow-moving, endless death of Black, Indigenous, and immigrant people worldwide every day in ways too frequent to track and too numbingly painful to witness and experience? Was America an empty land waiting for white settlers to come and develop its wonders? Is wealth magically created only by hard work and rugged individualism? Enough questions; you get my point.

I'm glad you are beginning to understand intersectionality. I'm still discovering its amazing power in my own life, its elasticity, and potential for ending all forms of injustice. But it is not a buzzword, hip lingo, or an accusation you can lob at those who you feel like calling out for not

being as “woke” as you are. That you feel compelled to use it that weaponized way to seek political kudos only proves how far you still have to go to understand that all our lives are on the line in this decidedly unsafe, interminable struggle to save our planet, protect our futures, and achieve peace and justice.

Intersectionality is our process; human rights are our goal. Get information and help build a unified human rights movement as a start. That’s one way to defeat white supremacy, but not the only way. We must allow everyone to have the space for their own unique journeys of self-discovery through understanding intersectionality, but we won’t stop the Freedom Train while you debate the price of the ticket.