



*Thinking Beyond
(More-than-human)
Intersectionalities*

by Aileen Kuang

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Outlined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an alternative to divisive identity politics, intersectionality theory acknowledges that different social identities overlap to shape individuals' experiences under systems of oppression. Building on Maneesha Deckha's proposal for a more-than-human intersectionality, this essay examines the limitations of intersectionality theory as a framework for radical social change. Deckha asserts that an effective intersectional politic must consider multispecies and environmental rights; while her argument makes important connections between speciesism, racism, and sexism, it reveals that intersectionality theory is ultimately a politic of recognition. Because it relies so heavily on sanctioned identity categories, it can only be useful for political advocacy within present social institutions and structures – it cannot push for a reevaluation of those same identities. Thus, I turn to Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges to suggest an addendum to intersectional frameworks. Rather than relying on preconstructed identities of race, class, gender, or even species to form relationships and solidarity, we can return to the theoretical body – positioned in networks of care and community – in order to imagine a society outside of existing hierarchies. As intersectionality theory guides us towards material change and reform, (re)grounding ourselves in the theoretical body may lead us towards a world liberated from repressive identities.

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Intersectionality is a theory that acknowledges the interactions and overlap between different identities and oppressive systems, such as race, class, and gender. It was introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an alternative to exclusionary identity politics, which “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” and consequently overlooks the fact that “the violence many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities” (1242). For Crenshaw and other theorists, intersectionality allows us to explicitly name the multiple identities that influence individuals’ experiences under systems of oppression –Crenshaw, for instance, discusses the overlapping influences of race and gender on the violence and oppression directed against Black women. In this way, intersectionality is a tool for political organizing, as it provides a foundation for coalitions of identity between different marginalized groups. However, as intersectionality theory has emerged as one of the dominant frameworks for feminist political organizing, it has also been critiqued extensively for perpetuating the oppressive systems it purports to subvert. Jennifer Nash, for instance, interrogates scholars’ reliance on Black women as “prototypical intersectional subjects,” which treats Black women as a monolithic group and contradicts the values at the core of intersectionality theory (198). Anna Carastathis further argues that the usage of racialized women as default intersectional subjects establishes those with certain social privileges – namely, men and white individuals – as “at home” in non-intersecting categories of race and gender, and therefore fails to acknowledge race, gender, and class as political relations rather than individual traits (27).

This essay is primarily concerned with the posthumanist limitations of intersectionality theory, particularly with Maneesha Deckha’s call for a multispecies intersectional framework. Deckha argues that an effective intersectional politic must shift towards a consideration of nonhuman species and environmental rights. However, I argue that this posthuman turn is ultimately ineffective – not because Deckha is incorrect in establishing the connections between race, gender, and species, but because her argument’s rhetoric remains anthropocentric in its attempt to apply human assumptions of justice to nonhumans and, consequently, its necessary reliance on pre-constructed categories of

identification. This rhetoric exposes a greater limitation of intersectional politics: whether it is posthuman or not, intersectionality is ultimately a politic of recognition. Here, recognition specifically refers to the construction and acknowledgement of subjugated identities by a dominant social class. When we use an intersectional framework, we rely on social categories that have been predetermined for us – and often predefined in order to uphold an unjust social order – to explain individuals’ experiences. So, instead of pushing us to question the legitimacy of these identities, intersectionality theory increases our dependence on them, which ultimately serves to reinforce hierarchies of race, gender, class, and species. Thus, in order to build a liberated future for all – humans, nonhuman animals, and other entities – we must forgo a politic that relies on external, systemic validation in favor of an alternate mode of relationality. Building on Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges, I call for a gaze situated within the oppressed body – a locus of possibility for connection and community – as an alternative to intersectionality. As we envision futures beyond racist, patriarchal systems, and therefore beyond traditional markers of identity, this new “look” provides an alternative means for forming communities and coalitions.

To begin, Deckha makes her case for a posthuman, multispecies intersectionality by highlighting the entangled relationship between species, racial, and gender hierarchies. Deckha argues that intersectionality currently relies on intertwined anthropocentric hierarchies which undergird structures of race and gender. Her argument illustrates Claire Kim’s concept of the “borderlands,” the liminal, shifting cultural space between the categories of human and animal that is inhabited by all non-white humans and the most human-like animals (24). Kim demonstrates that whiteness is considered “quintessentially human”; therefore, nonwhite humans and nonhuman animals who are excluded from both whiteness and humanity are constructed as racialized subjects (25). Indeed, Deckha describes the historical roots of such a racialized space, and adds gender as a factor shaping these human-animal borderlands – she outlines the notion of “Civilization” as a marker of humanness, a social construction catalyzed by the European desire to preserve their “claim[s] to specialness and humanness” amidst the Darwinian

challenge to species boundaries in the nineteenth century (Deckha 252). As Europeans attempted to distance themselves from their “bestial origins,” they characterized racialized and gendered Others as less-than-human; thus, constructions of race and gender were undergirded by anthropocentric hierarchies (252). These interconnected hierarchies have persisted since then, as humans are racialized based on their proximity to animals, and animals are also racialized and gendered. Black humans, for instance, have been constructed as apes in the Western imagination throughout history, a caricature which served to justify slavery and violence against Black people through dehumanisation (Kim 35). Additionally, the wolf has been gendered as female in order to justify lax hunting regulations and “secure a certain code of human masculinity” (257).

Ultimately, because of the intertwined constructions of race, gender, and species – and intersectionality’s claim to explore sites of injustice – Deckha argues that “intersectionality needs to resist the comfort of the humanist paradigm and reach across the species divide,” to call for both human and animal rights (267).

However, more-than-human intersectionality – as Deckha describes it – will not necessarily be effective in achieving and maintaining “justice” for nonhuman beings. This is due to the fact that her argument assumes the superiority of human modes of justice, thereby privileging anthropocentric views. She frequently references the concept of human/animal “rights” in her response to potential objections to the inclusion of nonhuman animals in intersectionality theory, which include the perceived threat of “animal rights” and posthumanist pleas for deconstructing the animal/human boundary...to still fragile human subjectivities” (259). Deckha argues that because species hierarchies are already innately intertwined with racism and colonialism, animal rights advocacy is necessary for a complete criticism of racial hierarchies (260). Although Deckha is correct in identifying the connections between race and species, the framework of intersectionality remains anthropocentric. The “human subjectivities” that are so precarious are only weak within the context of human social systems, which include both legal institutions and our cultural understandings of being. Indeed, human and animal “rights” only exist within

these systems and human ways of being in the world – a bear, for instance, is not aware of human laws which prohibit violence if it decides to attack a person. This argument for animal rights, then, is rooted in the idea that we need to uplift nonhuman animals within human societal systems – which animals may not subscribe to – in order for them to possess agency and autonomy. Therefore, even the call for a multispecies intersectionality is anthropocentric in reinforcing the perceived superiority of human social systems, as it asks how we might grant animals personhood within our own systems and institutions instead of interrogating human ways of knowing.

Deckha’s anthropocentric rhetoric furthermore underscores the limitations of intersectionality theory itself – it is a non-speculative political framework, a politic of recognition which creates community and coalition using sanctioned identity groups. Intersectionality is useful for working within pre-existing oppressive social structures, as it encourages marginalized groups to unite across shared identities for political advocacy. Crenshaw, for instance, explains that shared racial identities can be used to unite both men and women of color, just as it can be used to unite straight and queer people of color (1299). However, if the collective end goal of political organizing is a society free from hierarchies of identity which undergird and recreate oppression – such as race, gender, and sexuality – intersectionality is limiting because it is heavily reliant on such identity categories. In her article, Crenshaw outlines structural, political, and cultural forms of intersectionality: the three contexts in which different socially constructed identities fuse to create certain experiences for people who hold multiple marginalized identities. Crenshaw demonstrates that the political, structural, and representational treatments of rape against Black women cause harm or fail to provide adequate support for the victims because concerns about Black women “fall into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism” (1282). In recognizing that Black women’s experiences are shaped by both race and gender, we can better organize efforts to provide community and legal support. While Crenshaw’s examples demonstrate that intersectionality can be a useful guide for political advocacy, they also show that intersectionality is reliant on sanctioned

forms of identity. Since intersectionality is primarily concerned with how these externally created identities create certain individual experiences, it can only ever be used and understood within current oppressive social systems and institutions. In the United States, for instance, Blackness is a racial category which was constructed by elite whites during the antebellum period in order to justify and maintain slavery. The category of “Black,” then, still carries these historical connotations even now – and its continued existence signifies the presence of white supremacist social hierarchies which have utilized “Blackness” in order to create division and maintain oppression. Thus, intersectionality is not and cannot be a tool for a radical transformation of oppressive systems, as it inherently reinforces social categorization.

Consequently, we must look beyond even more-than-human intersectionality in order to work towards a liberated future for all. Feminist critic Donna Haraway’s framework of feminist objectivity provides a useful launch point. In her 1988 essay, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Haraway critiques scientific objectivity, or the notion that modern knowledge production is inherently unbiased. She uses vision as a metaphor for this objectivity, arguing that it “has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” – in other words, that this is a disembodied objectivity, rooted in nothing. Its gaze purports to be infinite, and it “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies... [signifying] the unmarked positions of Man and White (Haraway 581)¹. Through a narrative of finality, Western objectivity oppresses “marked bodies” – those belonging to colonized groups of women and people of color. Against this totalizing view, Haraway proposes a feminist objectivity, which is about situated knowledges: a “view from a body” that is one from a “complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body,” one that is partially made and always in relation to other bodies and beings (589). It is a location that “resists the politics of closure” and “finality,” suggesting that Haraway’s body is both physical and intangible (590). It is a view from somewhere rather than nowhere, which can be a singular body as well as a collective one – after all, collectives comprise individuals. But most importantly,

this means that Haraway’s body is both material and theoretical, where physical sensations can be used towards a feminist objectivity, but so can other modes of understanding and seeing, ones that are perhaps less easily understood as sensations. The “body” is not constrained by human ontological limits: it is communal and individual, corporeal and not.

Therefore, I propose a return to the theoretical body as a grounding locus of relationality with both human and non-human beings. While intersectionality relies on sanctioned categories – and consequently a view from above, or from nowhere – the situated body is positioned in networks of care and community. The theoretical body allows us to create a politic of solidarity, a parallel view, by emphasizing mutual care through sensations of feeling, seeing, and hearing – or other modes of nonphysical understanding – which facilitate relationship-building without placing others within a social location. Take, for example, the experience of interacting with a dog or cat, in which one’s responses could be driven by attempting to be in relationship with and understand them rather than assumptions of human superiority. Or even the simple process of forming connections and friendships with other humans, which are driven by sensations of mutuality – both physical and nonphysical. Although intersectionality can be utilized to improve material conditions of living for marginalized communities, we must learn to rely on these relationships with one another in order to construct parallel ways of knowing and move beyond the prescribed, white male gaze. If we only rely on intersectionality, we limit ourselves to the constraints of existing systems.

Overall, although Deckha’s framework of more-than-human intersectionality is useful, it is ultimately ineffective – not because of its inclusion of nonhuman species, but due to limitations of intersectionality theory itself. Intersectionality is a politic of recognition – it is not a radical reimaging of oppressive systems, as its reliance on sanctioned identity categories makes it only useful for political advocacy within dominant social structures and institutions. This essay is not intended to be a critique of the material changes that activists have made using intersectionality theory, nor does it argue that intersectionality theory is useless. In fact, its wide

reach and popularity has provided a foundation for many important DEI initiatives at companies, universities, and other institutions. I am only asking us to (re)consider whether intersectionality can be used to imagine futures beyond the patriarchy, white supremacy, and other forms of bigotry. Beyond intersectionality, I call for a politic rooted in the theoretical body rather than one of recognition. While this may seem like an amorphous concept, my goal is to suggest an alternative to intersectionality, which is a framework that might cease to be useful as we attempt to move towards a world free from restrictive identities and categories. This alternative politic might be developed over time, in tandem with organizing efforts that engage with intersectionality. My hope is that eventually, by locating power within our individual and collective bodies, we can find connection and community with other beings and environments – whether they are human or nonhuman.

Footnotes

1. In attributing the creation of subject and object categories to objectivity, Haraway also highlights that identity categories are used to uphold white male power, underscoring Carastathis' argument that intersectionality theory unwittingly enforces whitemaleness as the default, and therefore superior, subject.

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