

(Re)Imagining Intersectionality: TJFP's Radical Vision

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"Intersectionality" is a word increasingly common in our social justice vocabularies. A quick Google search of the term yields articles like, "Why intersectionality now," and explainer diagrams, photos, and videos. Despite the fact that the term is seemingly everywhere, few

seem to understand the origins and initial intent of "intersectionality"—not just as a buzzword for funders and nonprofits, but as a framework and approach for advocacy work and scholarship. Many black feminists have detailed the history of the term and critically responded to its circulation (see the work of Jennifer C. Nash for more), but here is a brief overview: legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, centering black women's experiences to explain how our legal systems do not (and cannot, in their current form) recognize the interactions and relationships between race and gender. She wrote:

Like traffic in an intersection, trans lives are messy: we might stand right in the center of the intersection, or we might be in a corner, watching or sometimes inadvertently being complicit in accidents and collisions. TJFP takes such messiness as a given.

Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.

The now-familiar phrase, "Our feminism must be intersectional" thus stems from Crenshaw (and other black feminists, such as Audre Lorde, upon whose work Crenshaw implicitly and explicitly builds) and her critique of how legal systems have historically subjugated black women.

Intersectional feminism must acknowledge how “gender” does not exist as a single axis of oppression—our experiences and understandings of, as well as policies and advocacy around, “gender” are always also about class, race, sexuality, nation, and a number of other factors. As a concept, “intersectionality” acknowledges how power and oppression can land on different bodies in varying ways. A white transgender woman who comes from class privilege, then, might experience gendered/racialized/classed forms of power radically different from a black gender non-conforming person (who may or may not use “trans” as an identity category) who comes from a working-class or poor background. An organization like TJFP, which takes a truly intersectional approach, takes these differences as a given in making decisions and in building community.

I’ve spent the last few years studying trans and gender non-conforming advocacy and funding for my doctoral research, specifically among trans and gender non-conforming people of color. As you might imagine, I’ve heard the word “intersectionality” numerous times. I’ve heard white development directors use it to describe “intersections” of funding categories, I’ve watched cis- and trans-identified folks insist upon an intersectional approach for their organization, and I’ve seen more grant applications than I can count with intersectionality sprinkled throughout. Most frustrating in most of these examples was the fact that many of these organizations were actually far from intersectional in their approach. They were primarily led by white cis-identified

people, and did not deeply consider how race, class, gender, and sexuality interacted in the lives of their constituents.

Given such overuse, when I saw that TJFP listed intersectionality as part of its scoring process, I was a tad bit skeptical. How can you score something that so few people understand, I wondered, and what might it look like for organizations to have a high or low intersectionality score? I trusted, however, that TJFP (as it always does) would surprise and wow me. Sure enough, panelists carefully considered how each grant application represented and discussed its models for



All Youth Inc., Lancaster, NY, 2018 TJFP Grantee

leadership, taking into account how different forms of power and oppression played a role in each group’s application. For example, when panelists assessed a small southern



Left: Trans Queer Pueblo, Phoeenix, AZ; right: Transfinite, San Francisco, CA; 2018 TJFP Grantees

organization led by a black trans woman, they knew immediately that intersectionality was necessarily a part of the leadership. This was not a simple game of what some call “identity politics” or “oppression Olympics”; rather, it was an acknowledgement of the workings of anti-blackness in the United States and globally, and a recognition of how black trans women often fall through the cracks that a concept and approach like *intersectionality* aims to fix.

The rates of violence that black trans women face, and the continued lack of resources provided to them and other gender non-conforming communities of color, make an intersectionality score and an emphasis on intersectional approaches for trans-focused organizing necessary. TJFP panelists recognized this deeply, and reckoned with the ways gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (to name just a few) came together in their own lives and in the lives of grant applicants. They challenged one another while they read through hundreds of applications, asking whether organizations centered trans and gender non-conforming people of color, took into account questions of class privilege in their application, considered ability in their programming, and/or included a diverse

group of people in their constituency. Often, these conversations were difficult—most people in the room were forced to reckon with their own privileges, and to apologize, acknowledge, and be held accountable for their biases—but in the end, TJFP’s emphasis on intersectionality allowed everyone to feel as if they had thoroughly assessed each grant application.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her initial conceptualization of “intersectionality,” recognized how difficult it might be to take an intersectional approach:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens at an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.

Like traffic in an intersection, trans lives are messy: we might stand right in the center of the intersection, or we might be in a corner, watching or sometimes inadvertently being complicit in accidents and collisions. TJFP takes such messiness as a given, and asks

panelists to show up honestly in the face of this to examine grant applicants from all possible angles. This, I think, is what makes the work of TJFP radically different from any other organization around today: actually considering and centering intersectionality, beyond using it as a buzzword, is in large part what gives TJFP a radical vision.

Further Reading

Articles

Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>

Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>

Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality." <http://anthropology.msu.edu/anp270-us15/files/2015/05/The-Complexity-of-intersectionality-McCall-2005.pdf>

Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality." <https://philpapers.org/archive/NASRI.pdf>

Books

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

Online Resources

Kimberlé Crenshaw, "The Urgency of Intersectionality" (TED Talk):

https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

Jennifer Kim, "Intersectionality 101: Why 'We're Focusing on Women' Doesn't Work for Diversity and Inclusion." <https://medium.com/awaken-blog/intersectionality-101-why-were-focusing-on-women-doesn-t-work-for-diversity-inclusion-8f591d196789>



Left: UTOPIA Seattle, Seattle, WA; right: TranzMission, Asheville, NC; 2018 TJFP Grantees