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Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries [book review]

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REVIEW

Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries. By Vivian M. May. London and New York: Routledge. 2015. Pp. 286. ISBN 9780415808408 (pbk), £29.99.

In her 2015 book, Vivian May sets out to right the wrongs done in the name of intersectional theorising since its inception. She contextualises this inception in a place that may be new to some readers: in the writings of Black American women from the nineteenth century, in particular, Anna Julia Cooper, a prominent educator and intellectual, former slave, and early Black feminist thinker. In this way, May demonstrates how intersectional thinking has a long and storied history prior to the coining of the term 'intersectionality' by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, with which readers may be more familiar. This historical context illustrates clearly how intersectionality as a concept is rooted in the experiences of formerly-enslaved Black American women, such as Cooper and her contemporaries, Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells. May then explores how their work was taken forward in the 1970s by the Combahee River Collective, and developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s by more well-known intersectional scholars such as Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks. Extending her analysis to a vast body of literature spanning time and geographical location, she critically examines what may be termed the intersectional tradition, a radical school of thought founded in the lived experiences and theorising of Black women, women of colour and women throughout the global South. By theorising and empirically illustrating the ways in which structural oppressions are interlinked, this literature forms the basis of what has come to be understood by many as feminism's and women's studies' most significant contribution to social theory (McCall 2005). May's survey is wide-ranging and comprehensive; in this respect alone, this book has already earned a place in the essential reading list of scholars of intersectionality and feminisms of colour.

But the book offers much more than a painstaking and enlightening literature review. May continues tracing the chronological trajectory of intersectional work – for example, its uptake in various academic disciplines, as well as art and literature by Black women – until she arrives in the current historical moment, in which it is apparently used widely across academic, policy, and activist contexts. But, she identifies, it is treated paradoxically – on one hand, necessary for progressive thinking and full of useful possibilities; on the other, criticised as insufficient, problematic and passé. This is the tension that drives the book's formidable critique: although intersectionality has been nominally embraced by mainstream feminist and social theory, its radical perspective on systems of domination and call to break from single-axis thinking remain practically unheeded. What's worse, she argues, its language has been co-opted, whilst the hegemonic paradigms of, for example, gender-first or race-first thinking have not sufficiently been destabilised. She describes frequent 'slippages' away from intersectional logics towards dominant logics, and the trivialisation or disappearance of intersectional concepts, even in contexts where intersectionality itself is ostensibly the framework being utilised.

May encourages us to take these slippages and absences seriously; they should not be seen merely as innocent misunderstandings, but as deliberate reactionary moves that take us away from intersectionality's revolutionary aims. This is compounded, she describes in a further chapter, by the vast body of literature that has emerged critiquing intersectionality –

although May clearly does not intend to portray it as immune to critique, she asks us to consider what it means when there is so much investment and energy devoted to challenging and devaluing a Black feminist knowledge product. She draws an illuminating parallel between this treatment of intersectionality and the way Black women, their bodies, their work and their knowledge, the indisputable sources of intersectional thinking, have historically been marginalised, exploited and ignored under white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. She links this critique to a recent turn in feminist theorising to the notion of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) wherein certain knowers are marginalised and their knowledge devalued. This simultaneous development of the testimonial injustice and intersectionality literatures is a notable aspect of the book's theoretical work, not to mention a powerful argument for those seeking epistemic justice to heed more closely the voices of the marginalised.

For all of the book's strengths, however, from a critical realist feminist perspective, there are some conspicuous silences. The most obvious of these is its apparent omission of the conversations around the philosophies of science, and in particular, a lack of discussion of the feminist turn towards poststructuralism. In combination with the wider economic context of neoliberalism, this addition would offer useful explanatory context for the preponderance of identity studies that have emerged under the umbrella of intersectional inquiry. The poststructuralist focus on personal meaning-making, combined with the neoliberal celebration of the atomistic individual, seem to have drawn intersectionality scholarship so far from its roots in structural analysis that it is somehow unrecognisable; Sumi Cho (2013, 393 as cited by May, 98) is perplexed when critics portray an intersectionality divorced from systems and structures, because its original engagement with them was explicit. However, this is not to say that we should be adhering to an originalist reading (Nash 2015), only that it is important to note that the turn in intersectionality scholarship towards identity, and any dilution of structural critique that may have occurred because of it, mirrors the poststructuralist turn in feminism, a point under-examined in May's book.

A critical realist feminist perspective must also engage with May's rejection of Lena Gunnarsson's (2011) argument to reclaim 'women' as an abstract conceptual category. May appears to equate Gunnarsson's defence of the term 'women' with adherence to a gender-primary logic and a rejection of intersectionality, when this may not necessarily be the case (if at all). Gunnarsson (2011, 26) clearly states that her critique of intersectionality is limited to the issues she sees with the 'anticategorical' camp (McCall 2005), which 'denies categories any analytical validity by virtue of their empirical inseparability'. The premise of Gunnarsson's article is not to drain intersectionality of its analytical power, but instead to develop a more complex and nuanced notion of the category 'woman', for the purposes of advancing a feminist agenda. May (2015, 206) herself acknowledges that hegemonic conceptions of gender need further unsettling. It seems that by reclaiming the term woman, and using critical realist tools – such as Doug Porpora's (1998) concept of structural positions – to deepen the theoretical framework underpinning its conceptualisation, this is precisely what Gunnarsson (32) seeks to do. A continuation of this line of thinking is also evident in a later article by Gunnarsson (2015) that seeks to introduce dialectical critical realism as a conceptual scaffold for intersectionality's both/and logic.

May critiques an example used by Gunnarsson (2011, as cited by May, 134) for its fundamental binarism: '[a woman] will tend to earn less than her male colleagues, since those who decide her wages are in positions motivating them to discriminate against women, and in order to promote her short-term interests she will be motivated to dress in feminine clothes.' Although the example is simplistic, it is logical according to an understanding of the gender pay gap and the aesthetic norms of hegemonic femininity, and it applies to many women from across a variety of demographic backgrounds. Additionally, although contemporary feminist scholars, influenced by queer studies and activism, tend not to conceive of gender as binary, the fact remains that the gender binary is still hegemonic, material influencing such things as gendered divisions in pay, which are of course exacerbated by intersectional influences such as race. Thus, such an example, while still open to critique, may be seen to hold true for many. It could of course be further expounded to include more explicitly the concerns of, for example, Black women who are motivated to chemically straighten their natural hair in order to be seen as 'professional'. But simply because it does not make this move does not mean that it is without value, only that it would benefit from making more explicit an intersectional sensibility.

Gunnarsson does not, as May charges, argue that intersectionality understands identity naively, only that it should allow for abstraction and analytic separability. Her critique of an 'empiricist fixation with physical appearances' (2011, as cited by May, 112) that May takes as equating intersectionality with an 'apolitical, positivist approach' comes after a discussion of the unnecessary dismissal of the notion of analytic separability when faced with the impossibility of physical separability of the various 'woman' parts of one's identity. If anything, Gunnarsson is simply critical of positivist trappings that have led intersectionality down such theoretical cul-de-sacs. Her advocacy of women's common abstract positionality should not be interpreted as a rejection of intersectional thinking, as she asserts: 'stating that women share a common position as women is not the same as maintaining that women are the same' (Gunnarsson 2015, 33).

It seems that both May and Gunnarsson agree that extant gendered concepts are insufficient, but they disagree on how to move forward. The injustice that May (2015, 201-207) claims is introduced by focusing on gender occurs primarily because the notion of 'gender' remains trapped within hegemonic ways of thinking, wherein the concept of 'woman', mired in Western heteronormative middle class and elite whiteness, excludes many, and gender is regarded as a 'common denominator' construct. Yet, a realist might argue that there is still value to be had in the concept of an abstract category, and that the notion of womanhood can, and should, be redefined as more inclusive – of women of colour, of disabled, poor, queer, and trans women. But their womanhood should not take analytical primacy, as would be expected if a gender-first logic was in use, and nor should it be treated as deterministic.

Of course, we would not expect emergence to feature prominently in non-critical realist arguments, but it also seems that the notion of a stratified ontology, with the biological being analytically separable from the psychological and the social, could bring much to bear upon these arguments. This is a second silence that a critical realist reading brings to light. Whilst Alice Walker's womanism, Black and postcolonial feminisms have crucially complicated hegemonic conceptions of 'women', and feminism more broadly has helped us

to understand that gender and, indeed, womanhood is in no way defined exclusively by the biological, it stands to reason that some aspects of what it means to be a woman (of any background, in any society) are biologically based, while others are psychological and still others are social. As a test for its intersectional validity and inclusiveness, this statement is also applicable in the case of trans women, whose womanhood, although different from that of cis women, is also impacted by biological, psychological and sociological factors. The negative impact of multiple intersecting oppressions has affected marginalised women throughout history at all of these levels, and committing ourselves to exacting multi-level analyses would help us to distinguish and articulate between them without distancing ourselves from the category of 'woman' entirely.

A more practical, but related, issue is the problem of whether or not we are able to analytically distinguish between categories for the purpose of research, analysis and theory development. It is a tenet of intersectional theorising, to which May adheres, that categorical identities are 'multiple and *enmeshed*' (114, original emphasis). Yet, a critical realist perspective advocates analytic separability as a useful thought practice by which we can 'do' social science, assess agency, interpersonal dynamics, and social conditions, in order to make knowledge claims. It is possible that we would be unable to convince May of its value, as she might reject the idea that each identity could be effectively looked at in turn, or even with an intersectional sensibility – for example, when considering the effect of gender on a racially and socio-economically mixed group, looking closely at the differential effects of race and class. Perhaps she would question the selection of a limited number of categories for inclusion in the analysis, or ask whether it may be epistemically unjust to circumscribe a sample according to specific categorical criteria. On these points, she may be right, and the methodological challenges of doing intersectional research (Bowleg 2008) might prevail. However, were she to dismiss the common critical realist thought practice of analytic separability as just another attempt at 'pop-bead metaphysics' – the 'notion that each identity is sequential, homogenous, and separable, like pull-apart beads on plastic toy necklaces' (Spelman, 1988, 136 as cited by May, 40), we would be able to counter. An intersectional realist feminism would emphasise that the identities are seen as neither sequential nor homogenous, but that the force exercised by each categorical identity may vary according to time and social location, and that these forces may in fact be dialogical and contradictory (Anthias 2013). One could also refer to the work of Margaret Archer, in which structure and agency are held analytically separate so that morphogenetic analysis can be carried out. Contra a pop-bead metaphysical logic, neither structure nor agency is held to be sequential or homogenous, and their force is acknowledged as deeply unequal; although we are aware that in practice (or in intersectional terms, lived experience) they are not separable, analytical duality is employed for theoretical ends, which may also be useful for intersectional theorising.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of decentering dominant logics and learning from the margins, there is a wealth of material in the book that could be drawn upon to further politicise and advance critical realist theorising. Particularly compelling is May's analysis of liberal (and neo-liberal) conceptions of agency. She argues that intersectionality ruptures these conceptions when it conceives of agency as sometimes occurring within the context of situations in which there are only two logical or practical options, both of which result in self-annihilation (2015, 46). This understanding of agency as possibly delimited by multiple

oppressive forces could help to contextualise and politicise the dominant CR conception of agency, which Mutch (2004) has suggested may overemphasise the voluntaristic role of the agent. Neither does it sufficiently account for the effects of social conditioning, nor the ways in which this impacts the internal conversations, conscious and subconscious, that Archer argues are central to social reproduction or transformation (2000). Thus, introducing an intersectional realist notion of agency that includes sometimes having to choose between equally oppressive options, reflecting a refusal to reproduce the status quo yet an inability to transform it, may help to add further nuance to discussions of agential deliberation.

A close reading of this text will likely give pause to all those who believe they understand intersectionality and use it effectively. Vivian May calls upon us to examine our political commitments to the project of liberation from systemic oppression envisioned by the early intersectional theorists, and to examine whether we are in fact honouring or co-opting their work to serve our academic aims, rather than using it to help to dismantle systems of domination. Marginality, according to this work, is redefined: no longer secondary to the main text, it instead functions in the way that marginal notes upon any text actually work – by enabling the reader to engage with, make sense of, question, and comprehend the information presented. Thus, ideas from the margins hold not less, but perhaps even greater importance towards the aim of understanding the world as a whole. The book powerfully interpellates all those who claim to take an intersectional approach, asking us whether we are too embedded in hegemonic thinking to hear and take seriously the knowledge coming from the margins, and if we are willing to listen and put it to its intended use.

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