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34
Intersectionality

Brenda R. Weber

"Ain't I a woman?" asked Sojourner Truth at Akron, Ohio's, Women's Convention of 1851. "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

Truth's point, told loudly and clearly, was that universal categories like "woman" reinforce an exclusionary norm of privileged and elite whiteness, leaving a vast majority of working-class women and women of color unrepresented, even invisible. The Women's Convention at which Truth spoke was one of many geared toward expanding the rights of women in the United States. The Akron event came on the heels of other such gatherings, such as the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention of 1848. This conference put forward the now famous Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, declaring that women (just as men) had a constitutional right to pursue happiness, to develop individual self-determination, to be educated, to speak their mind, to address an audience in public, to participate fully in the public sphere, and to vote (a political act not nationally allowed by law until 1920, some seventy-two years later). Yet somehow in the mighty coalition building that started in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and extended into the twentieth, Sojourner Truth's declaration went unheard, in that the specificity of personhood was not fully considered.

Fast forward to 1963. Betty Friedan writes a book called *The Feminine Mystique*, which is now widely credited for starting second-wave feminism. In 1957, Friedan had been asked to conduct a survey about her former classmates at Smith College, a private liberal arts school for women in Northampton, Massachusetts, and one of the Seven Sisters, or the "female Ivies," before women were allowed to attend Ivy League schools. Friedan argued that among those she interviewed, most were unhappy with their lives as housewives despite their middle- and even upper-class living conditions. Friedan credited "the problem that has no name" for a malaise that gripped the American woman, tied to house and home, her career ambitions and artistic talents directed to child care and a husband's needs. Friedan's book was a watershed moment in US gender politics, since it revealed the "happy homemaker" as a myth few women were able to uphold and began a conversation on women's work-life balance that is still ongoing.

But in its essentialism—its positioning of white elite women as *all* women—Friedan's rendering of the feminine mystique failed to consider women of color, working women, non-US women, and non-heterosexual women as part of the feminine mystique, thus positioning them outside the category of woman altogether. Friedan's work was no doubt important as a stakeholder in a much larger debate about women's rights, and she wasn't alone in using a universal standard of woman to forward women's rights. But because *The Feminine Mystique* lumped all women into one category, it ignored

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the important matters of identity such as race, class, religion, national identity, and sexual orientation that constantly influence how all of us understand and negotiate our own personhood and how we are treated by others. By the 1970s, black women like Alice Walker were pushing back, arguing that woman as monolith failed to account for the particularities of race and class that infused every element of their experience of female identity. In 1981, bell hooks took Sojourner Truth's declarative question—"Ain't I a Woman?"—as the title for a book that examined the effects of both racism and sexism on black women, the civil rights movement, and feminism. In 1989, feminist sociologist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to give name to this increasingly important mandate. In effect, more feminist scholars began to insist that comprehensive analyses needed to engage with multiple axes of identity to better understand interlocking and overlapping systems of oppression and power. It was not enough to speak simply of sex—male and female. A comprehensive study of power had to engage in multinodal understandings of identity.

All of these matters bear important relevance to media, which often traffic in shared ideas, common templates, and recognizable archetypes, even in this post-network age of niche programming and narrowcasting that speaks to one or two million viewers at a time rather than hundreds of millions. Yet, media content has a problem with disproportionate representation and misrepresentation, in that certain people and bodies (those who are attractive, thin, white, physically and psychologically able, perceived to be heterosexual, and middle to upper class) are chosen more often than others to sell us products, tell us stories, and stand as cultural authorities and role models. When people hailing from non-normative identity locations gain recognition through representation, they have often served as cautionary tales or as scare tactics or, in some cases, as the exceptions that prove the rules (a version of tokenism that seems to suggest that the presence of one queer person or black person, much less one queer black person, stands for all people within these categories). So intersectionality goes hand in hand with diversity, but it applies to one person's many forms of identity affiliation rather than letting one element of identity stand for the whole.

Intersectionality is critical to media studies because it requires that scholars and activists avoid short-handing identity. It is also a critical tool for media scholars because if intersectionality begins to function as a watchword of not just gender studies but also media studies, it suggests these same scholars must be attentive to the politics of identity. Let me illustrate. A few years ago, I was at a conference where scholars were discussing the classic war film *The Great Escape*. Someone in the audience asked for comment on the gender politics of the film. "Well," another scholar replied, "there are no women in the film, so there really aren't any gender politics." Yet of course a film with only male characters has statements to make about gender, just as it has statements to make about race, class, sexuality, and nationality. To the degree that all elements of media—producer, consumer, product—are occupied by people, intersectional identities are critical to how things are made, how they are understood, and what they are interpreted to mean and by whom. *The Great Escape*'s homosocial fantasy about prisoners of war who evade their captors contains rich information about power, masculinity, ethnic identity, class, and, yes, sexual orientation. Its mode of production, its almost cult-like following, its "tough guy" cast, its historical place in the culture, all tell us more when approached from an intersectional vantage point. And indeed, much important film and television scholarship—such as reception work offered in Jacqueline Bobo's *Black*

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Women as Cultural Readers (1995) or Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood's *Reacting to Reality Television* (2012) or cultural studies critiques in books such as Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight* (2007)—is leading the way in doing these sorts of intersectional analyses.

Yet, intersectionality itself must also be open to discussion and critique. In 2013, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* devoted an entire issue to new modalities for thinking through and beyond intersectionality, in both US and transnational contexts. Gender scholars such as Jasbir Puar (2007) have asked scholars to consider the ways that intersectionality as a term connotes a too-delineated relation of identity, like a car enmeshed in a great interstate spaghetti bowl, where one exits the whiteness highway to merge onto the queer express. Puar and others have recommended the governing metaphor of assemblage, or the idea that radical difference and heterogeneity often mark social relations and identities. Assemblage is more diffused, overlapping, and incoherent than intersectionality, accounting for the flow of both identity and power in ways simultaneously visible and undetectable. Indeed, assemblage is to intersectionality what transmedia are to traditional forms of media, in that both seek to engage with a complex social and ideological world of pluralized meaning making, where media serve as a powerful organizing force that is itself not always coherent, linear, or stable. As one example, the emerging field of celebrity studies indicates that one cannot "get at" the diverse appeals and contradictions embedded in fame without thinking across gendered, classed, and sexed lives but also without considering multiple and often fused media platforms, such as film, television, and social media, that influence how celebrity and celebrities become intelligible and hold cultural currency.

So, does this mean that the conscientious scholar must consider all aspects of identity when engaging in the overlap of gender and media? In some ways, yes. While a world of manageable categories and knowable metrics has a certain undeniable appeal, compartmentalized analyses obliterate much of the breadth we need to engage with the complex contours of identity, where gender, race, sexuality, class, orientation, and many other vectors work together to inform the meanings of personhood and power in the present moment.

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