

Art: Geoff Gildner, *Social Fabric* (2016).

Practicing Queer Intersectionality

By Jo Trigilio

Intersectionality. It's the latest trend. Everyone is talking about it. But what does it mean? More importantly, why should we care and what are we supposed to do about it?

Intersectionality refers to the intersections of multiple oppressions. The concept was popularized by black feminist critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw highlighted the ways in which the issues facing black women were neglected by race literature, which focused on men of color, and feminist literature, which focused on white women. Due to the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism, black women face challenges that differ from both black men and white women.

By definition, "oppression" means the systematic mistreatment of a group of people. To be oppressed means that one is met with obstacles and/or closed doors when trying to access the goods and services provided by institutions such as the educational or medical systems. For those who experience multiple oppressions, the hurdles are multiplied and interacting with institutions becomes exhausting.

"I'm a biracial, Asian American, queer transperson with a masculine gender expression," says Kaden from Medford. "I am all of these things at the same time." Sexual orientation cannot be separated from other identities. Being black, Latinx, Asian, poor, non-binary, disabled, indigenous, or multi-raced gives shape to how one is queer.

"Queerness" was conceived as a radical political term intended

to band together those whose gender and sexual expressions did not fit the heteropatriarchal norm. What is often ignored is that the binary sex/gender system in the US is deeply raced; the heteropatriarchal norm is white and middle class. "Respectable" forms of femininity and masculinity are coded as white, Christian, and middle class, casting women of color and poor women as hypersexualized or slutty, and casting men of color as hypermasculine or effeminate, depending on their race/ethnicity.

Intersecting oppressions – such as those related to race, class, and ethnicity – structure how we experience our sexual orientation, as well as the complicated forms of discrimination we may encounter. Let's consider the situations of two transmen: one white and one black. After transitioning, both are treated as cismen, and the risk of transphobic violence decreases. But, unlike the white transman, the black transman is now at increased risk of being perceived as dangerous, and is subject to harassment and violence by law enforcement. This increased risk, as well as other forms of racism, gives shape to his experience of being trans.

Consider another example. Women are routinely sexually objectified and are much more likely to experience sexual harassment than men. Compared to white women, women of color are at an even greater risk of sexual harassment. This is because the general sexual objectification of women intersects with the historic hypersexualiza-



tion of people of color in the US. As lesbians are further hypersexualized and fetishized by sexist pornography, femme lesbians of color are even more susceptible to harassment.

“When I am in a community that understands intersectionality, I can be myself – a whole person,” says Bonita, a black lesbian from Malden. “Unfortunately, in some contexts, I have to decide which part of myself to silence. For example, when I interact with people from my kids’ school, I cannot hide that I am a black woman. If they are already struggling with the fact that I am a well-educated, knowledgeable, assertive black woman, I have to wonder whether I can disclose that I am a lesbian in a cross-racial relationship with two mixed-raced children. Will this put them right over the edge? Will they act like I have multiple heads and they don’t know which one to look at? I am proud of all my identities and don’t want to silence any of them.”

Bonita goes on to note that this forced fragmentation of self can also happen in communities of color.

“When I am warmly welcomed into a non-queer black community, I have to wonder what will happen after I come out. Will I lose the wonderful sense of intimacy and love that was part of our initial interactions?”

Both Kaden and Bonita note how sexism, homophobia, and racism are often intertwined, tangled, and inseparable. Bonita says, “When I deal with some middle-class white men, I have to deal with their homophobia, sexism, and racism – all blended together. Their sexism is raced. Their homophobia is white-centered.” As Kaden puts it, “When I experience discrimination I have to ask, ‘What is happening here? Is it racism? Homophobia? Is it racism mixed with homophobia? How am I supposed to deal with it, when I can’t figure it out?’

If we are serious about addressing the oppression that all LGBTQI people face, we must understand and address the oppressions that intersect with homophobia and transphobia. If we fail to do so, we risk excluding LGBTQI people who experience multiple oppressions. We also risk inadvertently maintaining and reinforcing other forms of oppression beyond homophobia.

Taking intersectionality seriously means rejecting single-issue political strategies that focus only on sexual orientation. Single-issue approaches assume a white, male-centered norm, and ignore the ways in which sexual orientation is always shaped by race, ethnicity, and gender. Similarly, the LGBTQI movement must abandon political strategies that take the “we are just like you” approach. As Kaden says, “It’s easy for white, middle class gay men to say to their neighbors,

‘We may be gay, but otherwise, we are just like you.’ This does not work for those of us with multiple oppressions. And it misses the point of social justice which is to stop treating poorly those different from you.”

What are we supposed to do about it? Learn about other forms of oppression, reflect on our respective forms of privilege, and be better allies to each other. A commitment to social justice means that we cannot be focused only on the issues and experiences related to the oppressions we personally face. All queer people must engage in self-reflection, acknowledging the forms of privilege we each enjoy, and proactively learning about the forms of oppression that we do not experience, so that we can be better allies to those that do. Without reflection, people with a specific privilege remain oblivious to the hurdles faced by those who do not. If the door is always open to you, you may not be aware that it slams shut when others try to walk through it. This is the blindness of privilege.

Both Bonita and Kaden say they have found a home in queer community, but they are also clear that much still needs to be done regarding intersectionality. Says Kaden, “Because I have always been gender nonconforming, I feel most comfortable around queer people. Because I need queer community, it’s extra important to me that LGBT spaces are anti-racist, anti-sexist, and trans-inclusive.”

If we want inclusive LGBTQI communities, we have to care about the injustices with which all LGBTQI people struggle. As Kaden puts it, “intersectionality is important to me because I

care about other people around me: my friends, family, people in my community. I have kids who are not white, and one is gender nonconforming. I want a better world for them.”

“People need to take responsibility to learn about different forms of oppression,” states Bonita. “Community means caring about one another, differences and all.” ●

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Photo credit: Kevin Shea.