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Introduction to Intersectionality

While law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the word “intersectionality” in 1989,¹ the notions of overlapping and converging identities and social institutions had been part of black feminist thought since the days of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells. Crenshaw gave a name to this concept that explains how black women’s experiences of the ways overlapping identities (in this case gender and race) uniquely shape their experiences as “black women” within social institutions, such as work and law. Crenshaw drew specifically from court cases that highlighted the ignored effects of intersections in the lives of black women. In *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, for example, five black women sued General Motors for discrimination. They claimed that General Motors’ system of seniority disadvantaged black women because the company had not hired black women prior to 1964 and that made black women most vulnerable to the seniority-based layoffs that cost all of the black women hired after 1970 their jobs during a recession. The court found in favor of General Motors, declaring that black women were not a special class to be protected. The court stated that the lawsuit either had to claim discrimination on the basis of sex or on the basis of race but not both. General Motors, the court pointed out, had hired women long before 1964—white women—and therefore the plaintiffs could not claim sex discrimination. The court also dismissed the race discrimination claim and encouraged the plaintiffs to join another race-discrimination complaint against GM. The women refused, noting that their claim was one

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–67.

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of both race and sex discrimination. The court reiterated its belief that “black women” were not a protected category, affirming what Crenshaw explains as protections that only apply if black women’s experiences coincide either with the experiences of white women or of black men.²

In naming intersectionality, Crenshaw gave social justice theorists and activists an important tool for analyzing the nuances and complexities of oppression. The word has now become ubiquitous in social justice theory and practice, but its roots in the theorizing of black women are crucial to a full understanding of its multifaceted and simultaneous analysis and application, particularly as we move toward developing a method of intersectional theology.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality is a tool for analysis that takes into account the simultaneously experienced multiple social locations, identities, and institutions that shape individual and collective experience within hierarchically structured systems of power and privilege. In other words, intersectionality is a lens for understanding how gender, race, social class, sexual identity, and other forms of difference work concurrently to shape people and social institutions within multiple relationships of power. It is kaleidoscopic, constantly rendering shifting patterns of power visible. It is confluent, a juncture point where identities, locations, institutions, and power flow together creating something new. It is a praxis—an ongoing loop of action-reflection-action—that integrates social justice-oriented theory with activism toward social justice on the ground so that theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

Social justice is a structuring of institutions and relationships so that people’s basic needs are met, people are treated with equity and fairness, differences are welcomed and valued, and economic, social, political, and religious equality is achieved. Intersectionality’s greatest impacts have been in community organizing toward social justice and in the academy in fields such as women, gender, and sexuality studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies and, to some extent, in more traditional disciplines such as sociology, law, and political science. For example, theories of intersectionality have been central in the transformation of women, gender, and sexuality studies as a discipline so that issues of race/ethnicity, sexual identity, social class, ability, and other forms of difference are deeply and inextricably embedded in contemporary feminist thought

2. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” 141–43.

and pedagogy. In STEM fields, intersectional thinking has led to examination of the disparate experiences of white women, women of color, and LGBTQ scientists and engineers in the field and recent analysis of the impact of social differences on the way science itself is done and interpreted. Intersectional analysis helps us understand why Latina and black women scientists are frequently mistaken for janitors, when their white counterparts are not,³ or why the gender and sexual identity of a scientist or research subject can affect the results of a study.⁴ Using an intersectional lens helps us view phenomena in more complicated and nuanced ways that pay special attention to social differences, institutions, and power.

The next sections provide a brief overview of the history and workings of intersectionality that can begin to advance theological thinking toward an intersectional center.⁵ Traditionally, theology has assumed a white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied subject with very little self-reflection on the impact of theologians' social location on theology. In other words, for most of Christian history, straight white male theologians have spoken for everyone else, as if their theologies do not reflect the bias of their own social positions and power. This has meant that our theologies have been partial, a reflection of only a very small slice of the whole of human experience. In many ways, we have missed out on a great deal we could have learned about God and ourselves by ignoring and subordinating the experiences and theological reflections of most of humanity. An intersectional center demands that theology attend to difference and power and recognize the significant contributions to theology from diverse contributors and the limitations of theologies that only reflect a dominant or single-axis view.

3. Brigid Schulte, "Black and Latina Women Scientists Sometimes Mistaken for Janitors," *Washington Post*, February 6, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yexdrqrq>.

4. Richard Harris, "A Scientist's Gender Can Skew Research Results," NPR, January 10, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ybbbuls>.

5. For a full explication of the complexities and nuances of intersectionality, however, we suggest Vivian M. May's *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (2015), Ange-Marie Hancock's *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (2016), and Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's *Intersectionality* (2016). These works offer much greater depth than we can provide in this introductory volume and will serve as significant sources of information, questions, and challenges for those seeking to do intersectional theology.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Women's and gender studies professor Vivian May defines intersectionality as "a justice-oriented approach to be taken up for social analysis and critique, for political strategizing and organizing, for generating new ideas, and for excavating suppressed ones, all with an eye toward disrupting dominance and challenging systematic inequality."⁶ This complex understanding of intersectionality as a theory and an action-oriented method has evolved in the past few decades across the diversity of feminist scholars, but its roots are firmly in a tradition of black feminist thought that gender studies and political science professor Ange-Marie Hancock roots in black women's activism.⁷

As early as 1851, Sojourner Truth raised issues of intersections of race and gender in her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech in which she highlighted the interplay of race and gender in contemporary designations of womanhood. Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* anticipated intersectionality, recognizing the links between her race and her gender. Also, in the 1890s, Ida B. Wells connected issues of race and gender in her anti-lynching work.

Feminist activist Frances Beal's 1969 essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," critiqued sexism within the Black Power movement and racism within white feminism. The 1977 Combahee River Collective's statement added heterosexism to the mix of interlocking systems of oppression. The Collective noted that they found it "difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in [their] lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."⁸

Poet and womanist scholar Audre Lorde identified the American "mythical norm" as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" and warned that people could not simply identify only the way(s) they are outside the mythical norm but they must also acknowledge the ways they also benefit from the facets of identity that reside within the mythical norm.⁹ For example, she noted the ways white women often assumed gender as the "primary cause of all oppres-

6. Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 228.

7. Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

8. Audre Lorde, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 234.

9. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 116.

sion” while ignoring differences of race, class, sexuality, and age among women. Moreover, she argued that oppressed peoples cannot give priority to one form of oppression over another but must engage all of the intersections at the same time:

I was born Black, and a woman. I am trying to become the strongest person I can become to live the life I have been given and to help effect change toward a livable future for this earth and for my children. As a black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior, or just plain “wrong.”

From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism. . . .

Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.

I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination.¹⁰

For Lorde, the struggle against oppression must, of necessity, be multifaceted and simultaneous because oppressions by sex cannot be separated from oppressions by race, by class, by sexuality, by age. By giving voice to the need to attend to our simultaneous locations of oppression and privilege and declaring her refusal to parse out one identity over another, Lorde articulated key facets of intersectional theory that underline the complexities of identity that must be central in intersectional thinking.

In 1990, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins further complicated our understandings of how power is organized by elaborating the “matrix of domination,” the means by which intersecting oppressions are regulated through social institutions such as the family, government, education,

10. Audre Lorde, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, ed. Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 219–20.

and religion.¹¹ Her concept recognized the importance of context for analyzing how the matrix of domination organizes oppression. While oppressions of gender, race, class, and sexuality are all embedded in the matrix, the ways relationships of power are structured around these differences vary from context to context. She explains, “Domination is structured differently” in different times and places. In other words, “The universality of intersecting oppressions” is “organized through diverse local realities.”¹² Collins adds social institutions as another significant variable that must be considered in examining systems of oppression. So, for example, in a chapter on the black church, anthropologist, women’s and black studies scholar, and former college president Johnetta B. Cole and women’s studies professor Beverly Guy-Sheftall note, “The Black church is an institution that is a critical site for the subordination of women and the perpetuation of conservative gender ideologies on the one hand; and a place where womanist and feminist theologians challenge such ideas and practices of inequality and envision the kind of ‘beloved community’ that is constructed on principles of gender equality.”¹³ Womanism is an anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist theoretical lens that centers the experiences and perspectives of black women.

Other black feminist thinkers such as Beverly Smith, Angela Davis, Cheryl Clarke, bell hooks, and Barbara Smith have added to the complex understandings of how difference and power work at the intersections. And while intersectionality is clearly rooted in the work of black women, other women of color have also engaged in furthering complex and nuanced thinking in their own political struggles. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s coedited collection of writings by radical women of color, *This Bridge Called My Back*, was an important early work in drawing together the distinct yet overlapping experiences of gender, race, class, and sexuality in the theoretical, autobiographical, poetic, and artistic works of women of color. Anzaldúa also developed the concept of *mestiza* consciousness that derives from living in the “borderlands,” her image for the in-between spaces occupied by those who embody multiple oppressed identities. Other important works that highlight distinct, overlapping experiences arose from Asian American women such as Cathy Song and Kitty Tsui (*Making Waves*¹⁴) and Native women

11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 227–28.

12. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 228.

13. Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 105.

14. Asian Women United of California, *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1991).

such as Elizabeth Martinez (*Unsettling Ourselves*¹⁵). While a great deal of intersectional thinking centers on the Global North, women of the Global South such as Musa Dube and Kwok Pui-lan have also raised issues of transnationalism and cross-border relationships. Each of these approaches highlights the particular struggles faced by women based on different races, sexualities, classes, and ages and underlines the need for building alliances and coalitions across differences.

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality, Vivian May explains, is a “problem-solving approach.”¹⁶ It is action-oriented, and so perhaps the better question is not what *is* intersectionality, but what does it *do*?¹⁷ As a liberation politics, intersectionality makes power visible,¹⁸ particularly where resistance and dominance often collude to subordinate nuances and complexities of intersections.¹⁹ Importantly, intersectionality is not an additive approach;²⁰ rather it is an approach that holds multifaceted identities and systems of oppression in mind as simultaneous and mutually shaping forces that situate people differently within the matrix of domination. This complex and nuanced thinking moves us away from single-axis analysis (gender or race or sexuality) to matrix thinking, allowing us to attend to in-group inequities as well as inequities across groups.²¹ It rejects either/or thinking in favor of both/and, and it demands real-world applications to everyday life and to social structures.²² As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge remind us, intersectionality’s focus on people’s real lives opens space for diverse perspectives;²³ in other words, different people provide different analyses of the same phenomena. And in intersectional thinking, this analysis is always biased toward justice.²⁴ As Vivian May explains, intersectionality is not neutral: “Intersectional work takes a stand against inequality and harm and overtly aims for social transformation and meaningful change.”²⁵

15. Unsettling Minnesota Collective, *Unsettling Ourselves: Reflections and Resources for Deconstructing Colonial Mentality*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/ycqzgzxu>.

16. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 19.

17. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 5.

18. Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*, 57.

19. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, viii.

20. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 3.

21. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 4.

22. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 5.

23. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 18.

24. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 28.

25. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 28–29.

Keeping intersectional thinking at the center, however, is not easy. May warns of “slippages” that can send us back into single-axis thinking.²⁶ For example, in an attempt to make intersectionality more “universal,” we may actually depoliticize or deracialize it.²⁷ In other words, we can argue that everyone’s identity is intersectional without exploring the political ramifications of those differences within systems of hierarchical gendered and racialized power. Intersections are not just about identities; they are also about institutions and systems of power that also intersect and give shape. We can also create hierarchies of oppression that slip from intersectionality’s core commitment to simultaneous multifaceted analysis. bell hooks illustrates this when she contends that feminists should not try to bond over shared experiences of victimization as women or some abstract notion of womanhood, but rather they should bond over a shared political commitment to ending sexist oppression.²⁸ We also lose sight of the intersections when we focus on the oppressions that affect us without paying attention to the ways systems of power and privilege also advantage us at the same time. As early as 1983, feminist scholar and publisher Barbara Smith noted the difficulty, for example, for many liberation groups to include heterosexism in their analysis. She wrote, “Despite the logic and clarity of Third World women’s analysis of the simultaneity of oppression, people of all races, progressive ones included, seem peculiarly reluctant to grasp these basic truths, especially when it comes to incorporating active resistance to homophobia into their everyday lives.”²⁹ May cautions that such single-axis thinking universalizes the experiences of some as if they can represent all, obscuring differences within groups, as well as the power relations that work in and between groups.³⁰ Ange-Marie Hancock worries also about the possibilities of the co-optation of intersectionality when scholars attempt to use it within the existing ontological and epistemological frameworks of their disciplines. It thus becomes a “tool for reform at the margins” rather than a “framework with the potential to radically reform our structures of government and public policies, as well as to make other changes.”³¹

For Collins and Bilge, key to intersectional analysis is understanding how power is organized. They note four “distinctive yet interconnected

26. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 15.

27. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, ix.

28. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 47.

29. Barbara Smith, “Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?” in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 112.

30. Smith, “Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?” 82.

31. Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*, 13.

domains of power: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural.³² The interpersonal domain of power is the domain where individuals interact and relate to one another across various advantages and disadvantages. The disciplinary domain of power is how the rules work, how power operates to “discipline” people’s lives through the options afforded or not afforded to them. The cultural domain of power is the ideas and messages that shape our understandings of difference and power (the playing field is level; we live in a meritocracy where people are rewarded according to their effort). Finally, the structural domain of power is the mutually reinforcing relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, and social institutions.³³ Through these four domains, power and resources are distributed inequitably across differences, producing and reproducing social inequality.

CORE CONCEPTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Collins and Bilge delineate six core concepts of intersectionality that will be especially useful in developing an intersectional theology:³⁴

1. **Social inequality:** Intersectionality recognizes the simultaneous and multiple factors that contribute to social inequality. Rather than seeing social inequality as the product of only one factor—class or gender or race—intersectionality challenges us to see social inequality as the product of the interactions of difference within social institutions.
2. **Power:** Power is constructed, maintained, and distributed in the interactions of gender, race, nation, and other forms of difference within interlocking systems of oppression. Power relations, Collins argues, must then be analyzed both at the intersections and across the domains of structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal power.³⁵
3. **Relationality:** Relationality demands a both/and approach rather than an either/or approach. It centers interconnections and complicated relationships rather than single factors or static entities.³⁶

32. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 7.

33. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 7–13.

34. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 25–30.

35. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 27.

36. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 28.

4. **Social context:** All power relations occur within a context, and so intersectional thinking requires we consider the historical, social, intellectual, political, and religious contexts that give shape to our analysis. This approach opens up the possibility for distinct and differing perspectives that add to and complicate our own and helps us understand difference itself.³⁷
5. **Complexity:** By refusing a single-axis analysis, intersectionality creates space for complexity, fluidity, and even contradiction in our understandings of power, privilege, inequality, and resistance. This complexity is what makes intersectional thinking so difficult and inclines us toward “slippages” if we do not keep intersectionality at the forefront of our thinking.
6. **Social justice:** Intersectionality, as May has argued, is biased toward social justice. We engage in intersectional thinking in order to act in the world to bring about change that dismantles oppressive systems and creates inclusive and equitable systems for all people.

Intersectional analysis, then, functions with its bias toward justice to uncover and restructure power relations by dismantling oppressive ideologies, practices, and institutions. Activist and scholar Angela Davis demonstrates the importance of intersectional thinking in her analysis of the women’s movement. She challenges white feminists who acted as if progress for women were a separate issue from race and social class, as if there were “such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and fighting back in an abstract historical context.” She points out that such an abstraction can only arise when analysis of gender occurs in isolation from intersections with race and class: “That state of abstraction turns out to be a very specific set of conditions: white middle-class women suffering and responding to the sexist attitudes and conduct of white middle-class men and calling for equality with particular men. This approach leaves the existing socioeconomic system with its fundamental reliance on racism and class bias unchallenged.”³⁸

To avoid these slippages, May encourages us, then, to understand intersectionality as an epistemological practice, an ontological project, a coalitional political orientation, and a resistant imaginary.³⁹ These concepts will prove essential in developing intersectional theologies.

As an epistemological practice, intersectionality “attends to knowers’

37. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 28.

38. Angela Davis, *Women, Culture, Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 18.

39. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 34.

social location."⁴⁰ It includes lived experience and rejects any assumption of a normative center.⁴¹ Because intersectional thinking assumes all knowers are situationally located in different relations to power, it underscores the inherent political nature of knowledge and the production of knowledge. Knowledge, then, is not objective and neutral but deeply embedded in power relations, and so intersectionality calls for questioning of who is an authoritative knower, who has access to knowledge, who has access to the production of knowledge, whom does knowledge serve?⁴² Because those with greater social power have typically had greater access to the production and distribution of knowledge, their ideas have usually prevailed as dissenting narratives have been silenced and made invisible. Intersectional thinking uncovers these hidden discourses and affords them epistemological privilege in understanding how power and oppression operate.

As an ontological practice, intersectionality highlights multiplicities of identities. In other words, people are "ontologically plural"; they exist simultaneously in multiple relations to power and identities; they are at the same time constrained by power, resistant to hierarchy, and often complicit with domination.⁴³ This means intersectionality understands identities not as separable entities but as thoroughly integrated, mutually shaping and reinforcing forces. Identity categories, however, are not static essences but shifting frames in and through which people experience the world. They are not, as sociologist and women's studies professor Irene Gedalof explains, "straightforward descriptions of pre-existing realities but are discursive constructs that continually produce the realities they claim to describe."⁴⁴ Insisting that we are "the same and different," rather than privileging one identity over another, emphasizes how identities are constituted by intersections so we understand that gender is not separable from race or sexual identity or other factors.⁴⁵ Intersectional thinking allows us to understand people as more than a single aspect of identity. Instead this both/and approach allows for the complexities and contradictions and refuses fragmentation of the self into the atomized compartments of either/or thinking. May argues that rather than fixed positions, identities are orientations toward the world that

40. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 34.

41. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 34.

42. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 34–36.

43. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 39.

44. Irene Gedalof, "Sameness and Difference in Government Equality Talk," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (2012): 3.

45. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 42.

allow us to plumb intersections, overlaps, contradictions, complicities, and resistances.⁴⁶

Significantly, intersectionality is also a coalitional politics; it challenges us to work together across differences to create change toward social justice in such a way that we do not fragment ourselves or deny any aspect of ourselves. American studies professor Duchess Harris calls it "polyvocal."⁴⁷ A coalitional politics toward social justice requires a self-reflexivity that pays attention to our privileges as well as our oppressions and recognizes that we may have to give up some of those privileges in order to engage in the work of justice.

Finally, May argues, intersectionality is a resistant imaginary. Intersectionality calls for us to shift the center, to move the experiences of the marginalized from the periphery and to hear the voices of those who are usually silenced by social power and hierarchy. This remembering of otherwise neglected histories can help us see the disjunctures and disruptions of multiplicity and can make hidden resistances visible.⁴⁸ In other words, intersectionality demands a "countermemory" that reads the existing archive "against the grain."⁴⁹ This lens helps us see the history and effects of imbalanced power relations and denaturalizes oppression by uncovering its operations. It allows us to question the historical accounts we have been given and explore the silences to unearth the stories of those marginalized within dominant discourses. Intersectionality then creates space to create the stories to which we should have had access,⁵⁰ and so to a great degree intersectional thinking relies on the re-membered imaginations of poets and novelists as well as sociologists and theologians.

WHY DOING THEOLOGY AT THE INTERSECTIONS MATTERS

Intersectionality is significant for theology in a number of ways. For too long, theology has been done by white heterosexual Western men who have treated theology as something pure, pristine, and nonsyncretistic. Theology has mostly been a monochromatic and one-sided discourse that does not take seriously voices from the Global South or

46. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 47.

47. Duchess Harris, "All of Who I Am in the Same Place": The Combahee River Collective," *Womanist Theory and Research* 2 (1999): 16.

48. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 53.

49. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 54.

50. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 59.

voices of women or voices of other marginalized groups. This singular one-sided voice has dominated much of our Christian history to the detriment of groups of people it marginalized. Therefore a new method and approach to doing theology is long overdue and necessary. Engaging in a new theology that will be liberative for all people and especially for the oppressed and the marginalized is critical.

New forms of liberation theology emerged in the 1960s that took seriously the context and social location of those who were experiencing oppression, subordination, and marginalization. But these liberative voices were mostly one-dimensional in tackling and understanding their marginalization and oppression. In search for a theology that examines and takes seriously the interconnectedness of lives and the intersections of oppressive powers, we believe that intersectionality is an essential tool in developing a liberative theology for the oppressed and marginalized across and inclusive of all differences.

Intersectionality as a method for theology can be significant and meaningful. Vivian May explains, "Everyone has intersecting identities and all of us live within interlocking structures of raced and gendered social stratification."⁵¹ In other words, each of us has gender, race, sexual identity, social class, and other forms of social difference, and we all live within relationships and social institutions that confer advantage and disadvantage based on those identities. As May argues, intersectionality is "relevant to and 'about' all of us, and it is not neutral."⁵² This matters for theology because we do theology from those identities and within those interlocking systems of oppression. Certainly the contextualized theologies of liberation take note of the identities and systems that shape the theologians engaged in feminist, queer, womanist, Latin American, and other forms of liberation theologies. Many times, however, even these contextualized theologies neglect a full account of the ways identities and institutions overlap and shape one another. They may shift the center to an oppressed group, but they often remain single-axis forms of theology. For example, Latin American liberation theology focused primarily on socioeconomic disparities between rich and the poor. As a new way of doing theology, Latin American liberation theology arose out of poor base communities that experienced poverty and lack of economic resources for their families and community. Yet this new focus did not consider the impact of other junctures with economic oppression. Despite its commitment to reforming the economic landscape for the poor, Latin American liberation theology failed to examine issues

51. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 25.

52. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 12.

of colonialism, gender, race, and sexuality that interconnect and overlap with socioeconomic concerns.

On the other hand, a great deal of traditional/systematic theology proceeds as if matters of context, social location, and systems of oppression are irrelevant to the doing of theology. Vivian May's point, that all people have intersecting identities, is particularly salient when applied to traditional/systematic theology because white, heterosexual men do still write from a particular social location that is often rendered invisible and assumed to be normative. In other words, traditional/systematic theology proceeds as if it is somehow neutral and objective, built only from sacred texts and/or reason, somehow divorced from the overlapping identities and social location of its authors.

For example, one of the most influential theological voices of the twentieth century was Karl Barth, who relied on the Bible and did not value context or social location when doing theology. Barth's work appeared in response to much of the liberal theology that offered an enculturated understanding of theology. Barth wanted to disassociate any human search for or approach to God, as Barth believed in a top-down theology. For example, Barth understood the Spirit as coming from above and not from below. For Barth, revelation in Jesus Christ was not only sufficient; it was also complete.⁵³ According to Barth, we come to know God through Scripture and thus do not need categories such as the social sciences, psychology, science, and literature to help us do theology. Revelation is complete in Jesus.

Ange-Marie Hancock's explication of intersectionality also reminds us that intersectionality is not a concept that can simply be added to the theological toolbox. Instead, intersectionality should radically reform the ontologies and epistemologies of theology so that issues of social difference, power, and justice are always central in our theologizing. Drawing on literary and social theory traditions, she argues that we produce knowledge within interpretive communities and these interpretive communities have particular gendered and racialized histories that matter in the knowledge they construct.⁵⁴ For theology, this means that the whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality of most theologians throughout history matters and should be subject to interrogation as much as their reasoning and biblical exegesis. Going forward, this means that theologies of the future should no longer proceed as if social locations and systems of oppression are irrelevant; rather theologies, including those written by white, heterosexual men, must shift epistemologies to begin,

53. Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 33, 34.

54. Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*, 16.

not in abstraction or in a text, but in a context that shapes abstract reasoning and textual analysis. And that reasoning and analysis should, as May argues, be biased toward justice.

DOING THEOLOGY AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Vivian May offers four commitments that theologians can borrow to guide theologizing that is intersectional:⁵⁵

1. "Honor and foster intersectionality's antisubordination orientation." Because it is biased toward justice, intersectionality rejects the subordination of individuals or groups. For theology, this suggests focused attention toward constructing theologies that purposefully destabilize structures of power and facilitate inclusion and equity.
2. "Draw on intersectionality's matrix approach to meaningfully engage with heterogeneity, enmeshment, and divergence." May encourages us to keep on center differences within categories so we don't negate in-group differences and ignore the impact of, for example, the intersection of race with gender. This also allow us, she argues, to unearth "layers of suppressed meaning" and "unpack" dominant explanations. In theology, this attentiveness allows us to ask unexpected and disruptive questions and problematize assumed and accepted conventions.
3. "Take up intersectionality's invitation to follow opacities and to read against the grain." Reading against the grain invites us to approach traditional theological notions with skepticism and to make visible the workings of power in our usual way of thinking about theological doctrines and practices. It encourages us to move the voices of the marginalized to the center of our theologizing and recognize theological sources outside the typical norms of traditional theologies.
4. "Set aside norm emulation as a philosophical/political/research/policy [and we would add 'theological'] strategy." Intersectionality invites theology to challenge its own disciplinary norms and to embrace imaginative, challenging, and disruptive ways of doing theology that resist hierarchy and work toward justice. An intersectional approach demands that we rethink

55. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 229.

our ways of doing theology and formulate theological methods that embed an intersectional lens.

Embracing intersectional thinking means that we should approach doing theology by questioning assumptions that are rooted in the norms of dominant culture, purposefully pursuing justice, embracing the complexities and contradictions, and refusing to do theology as usual. A recent example of such intersectional work in theology is womanist queer theologian Pamela R. Lightsey's *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. Lightsey ties her intersectional theologizing closely to the aims of justice. She writes, "Not unique to womanist scholarship is this work's intersectional analysis that explores the impact of race, gender, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation on the theological understandings of LGBTQ Black women. These points of departure from what some call 'orthodox' Western theology remain critical to the work of womanist scholars because these subjects are significant to the peace and reconciliation of the peoples of this global world."⁵⁶ Significantly, she also identifies her orientation and history in the Wesleyan tradition of the United Methodist church as another axis of identity to be analyzed as part of her intersectional work.

While some thinkers critique contextual and intersectional thinking as breaking people apart into smaller and smaller units, intersectional thinking does not lose its broader relevance to all of us by its attention to the specific details of individual lives. Instead, intersectional thinking adds complexity to our theologies that is more reflective of the diverse realities of differently situated lives. The ever-changing subjects of intersectional thinking challenge theologies that declare themselves absolute truth and remind us that none of us has a decontextualized and unmediated knowledge of ultimate reality or the divine. To approach an approximation of larger realities we must be inclusive in our analysis to account for diversity, and we must be directed toward justice as we center our examinations of power and hierarchy as inherent parts of our theologies.

We imagine intersectional theology as kaleidoscopic. Intersectional theology is a destabilizing theology that reminds us that our theological ideas are always tentative, and theology is always an ongoing process. A kaleidoscopic theology is one that is constantly changing with each turn of perspective; it holds multiple (and sometimes competing) views in mind at the same time. It makes visible the differently situated knowers and the complex web of relationships and social institutions in which

56. Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), xx.

it is embedded. It is contingent and recognizes its own rootedness in the social location of the theologian and within interlocking systems of oppression. Significantly, it is also self-reflexive, always interrogating itself for possible complicities with structures of subordinating power and seeking relevancy toward social justice for all people.

Intersectional thinking is rooted in and values narrative ways of knowing.⁵⁷ It is always contextualized and pays attention to differently situated knowers. For intersectional theology, this means story is a starting place, particularly subjugated stories that illuminate the mechanisms of power across identity categories and social institutions within systems of oppression. In the next chapter, we offer a comparative and contrasting telling of some of our own stories to reveal the workings of difference and power in our own lives and to demonstrate the movement from story to theology that is intersectional.

57. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 20.

QUESTIONS

1. What is your social location? Where do your gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, social class, ability, age, nation of origin, and religion intersect and situate you within structures of social, political, economic, and religious power? How does your social location affect the ways you do theology? How can this awareness help you be attentive to the theologies of people who are differently located and allow those theologies to be in dialogue with your own beliefs?
2. Why is situating our understandings of intersectionality within black feminist thought essential for work toward social justice?
3. What assumptions undergird your theology? What assumptions might people in other social locations hold? How might those assumptions challenge or enhance your own?
4. How has your theology been formulated in an either/or framework? Does a theology of both/and seem inviting to you?
5. How has a single-axis thinking limited your perspective or understanding of your own experiences? How has single-axis thinking universalized your experiences as if they represent all people's experiences?
6. We produce knowledge, including theology, within interpretive communities. What role does your interpretive community play in how you think about God, sin, salvation, the church? How might other interpretive communities add to your understandings?
7. This chapter touched on power and power relations. Have you experienced power negatively? How can power be used for building each other up and working toward justice?
8. How do you ensure your theologizing is not complicit with structures of domination and subordination? How do you ensure your theologizing is biased toward justice?