

Mapping Injustice Towards Feminist Activism

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Cover Page Footnote

There is no first author. This is a collaboratively written essay.

MAPPING INJUSTICE TOWARDS FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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Our Seneca Falls Dialogue workshop focused on how to construct feminist activism through dialogical mapping. We began the Dialogue by introducing the concept of intersectionality. Many scholars examining the construction of gender and race often focus on one or the other of these categories, rarely considering them as inseparable entanglements or “as complex, mutually reinforcing or contradicting processes” (Acker 442). Intersectionality highlights the relationship between multiple kinds of subordination (Cole 170; Crenshaw 93; Damaske 402) and considers how hegemonic structures intersect to oppress the lives of racially marginalized communities (Kantola and Nousiainen 459). While intersectionality theory helps to reveal the impact of multiple forms of oppression, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s simple analogy to an intersection warrants a reconsideration of how each form of oppression mutually informs the other.

This article presents the processes and outcomes of our workshop in which we re-envision intersectionality theory as an entanglement of social identities and circumstances that hampers one’s ability to escape, disengage or act at will; and systemic changes needed to address societal barriers. Entanglement includes the relationship of material bodies and ideological standpoints that are entanglements of social, political, and economic inequities; entanglements of complex and nuanced multiple selves and shifting identities; entanglements of tacit, situated, and authoritative knowledge; and entanglements that reside in culturally hegemonic, stratified social structures that control options in people’s lives.

Entanglement builds upon and incorporates the notion of intersectionality. While intersectionality has facilitated understandings of the impact of colliding forms of oppression within legal and academic fields, the term has become a feminist buzz word and has been appropriated in ways other than those intended by African American legal scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term in 1989 to explain injustice and violence against Black Women (Emba 2). The term has now broadened significantly and is often used as a blanket term to describe the combination of numerous social factors, including disability, sexuality, and nationality, among others. Everything is an intersection. Even so, policies, the legal justice system, and daily actions do not reflect notions of intersectionality (Emba 3).

In The Free Dictionary, “intersect” means to cut across or through; while the term “entangle” means twisted together or caught in a snarl or entwining mass. Arguably, when something is twisted together in an entwining mass, it is more complicated or messy than something that potentially cuts across or intersects with something else. To further clarify, intersections are not always entanglements; however, entanglements are always intersections. Thus, the term “entanglement” considers the nuances of language and a more complicated rhizomatic relationship between twisted and entangled parts. Therefore, “entanglement” is more wide-ranging than “intersectionality” and can serve better as a means to understand the inherent complexity of the simultaneity of marginalized social identities and experiences.

MAPPING ENTANGLEMENTS

During our Seneca Falls Dialogues session, we facilitated a process that focused on entangled social identities by offering a means to map multiple and simultaneous strands of injustice, inequality, discrimination, and oppression. Mapping entanglements of social identities is a process of creating a graphical representation or picture that illustrates the complicated relationship among and between marginalized social identities. Like intersectionality, entanglement is not a simple or straightforward concept; however, entanglement does make visible and

problematizes how power structures and power relations are enmeshed, preserving social, political, and economic inequalities. Our activity was an attempt to re/capture and re/focus attention on complexly interwoven, twisted, and tangled parts of social identities and identity hierarchies, and how the interactions of each hierarchy influence the dynamics of others. Mapping entanglements of social identities revealed injustice, inequality, discrimination, and oppression.

Many injustices affect individuals and groups with marginalized social identities daily, many with implications for generations to come. Because there are many injustices, it can seem at times too much to muster agency, energy and time to do anything toward justice. While many, if not all, injustices are entangled with social identities—making them seem impenetrable—addressing one thread may begin to unravel the mesh (and mess) of seemingly growing injustices. Thus, we must stand up for justice in times of crisis and violation of human rights; whether or not change can happen should not hinder us from trying to effect change. Given the U.S. climate today that normalizes misogyny, violence, White supremacy, racism, and ableism, to name a few encompassing injustices, we asked participants to focus on one specific injustice that deeply matters to them.

We presented the following injustices at our workshop to draw attention to the entanglement of racism and sexism with other forms of discrimination and oppressive systems:

- Four out of five Indigenous women experience violence in their lifetime, with the majority of these cases being a form of sexual violence, including stalking, harassment, and assault (Rosay 1).
- Climate change is inescapable; but, there is still an opportunity to “seize the best-case scenario rather than surrender to the worst” (Solnit 2). Climate action is necessary to preserve “human rights because climate change affects the most vulnerable first and hardest – it already has, with droughts, fires, floods, [toxins in water], and crop failures” (Solnit 4). Rather than attempt to figure out how to stop the destruction of the planet, we asked participants to consider one specific

injustice, more specific than the climate change crisis. For instance, we asked participants to think of a particular act impacting their environment, such as pipelines and fuel trains, refineries and shipping terminals, fracking and mountaintop removal, divestment and finance, policy and law, gentrification, environmental racism, and so on.

- We also asked participants to consider the racial disparity in the United States concerning arrests and incarceration. We provided data related to mass incarceration as an act of state violence. For example, people of color constitute about one-third of the total population in the U.S. yet comprise more than one-half of all people incarcerated in the United States (NAACP 8).
- Moreover, unarmed Black people are murdered by police disproportionately, and harassment from surveillance and racial profiling occur every day (ACLU 1). Black women, Black queer, and trans folks continue to bear the burden of relentless assaults while being disenfranchised from human rights. Though the injustices are numerous as people target Black lives both systematically and intentionally—we encouraged participants to focus on a specific experience or witnessing of a specific occurrence of injustice.

Participants thought about specifics (who, what, how, why) concerning the injustice they chose. For instance, we asked participants to consider who is involved, in what ways, and how is the injustice normalized?

Participants identified focal points, overlaps, or strong linkages to the past. We discussed when/what/where are the flashpoints that have contributed to the injustices today. We questioned funding, mainstream media, news, and policies in the process of mapping injustices. As participants mapped the injustice in relationship to entangled social identities, they also searched for places to remap toward justice. For instance, in remapping and revisioning the injustice, we identified groups and coalitions that are working toward justice concerning the specific injustice and entanglement(s).

TERRAINS OF INJUSTICE: ROADMAPS TO ACTIVISM

The following are examples of some of the maps developed by groups of two to six participants during the workshop: While four of the nine maps focused on sexual assault, three maps focused on racism, and the other maps focused on hegemonic control of resources and opportunities. Through graphic depiction, each map conveys an entanglement in which participants identified race, gender, economics, and other constructed hierarchies as forces of injustice. Participants shared stories of injustice, experienced, or witnessed. One participant described entanglements of race, gender, and class injustice based on a personal experience in which the individual was handcuffed and violently removed from public transportation by authorities for sharing a bus pass with a stranger who needed help getting to work. The participant self-identified as being a trans woman of color who was attempting to help another woman of color from a low socio-economic background who otherwise could not get to work without bus fare.

Still focusing on the experiences of trans women of color, one group pointed out the high number of murders of trans women of color that have not been acknowledged by LGBTQ+ communities. Moreover, the participants noted that people have instilled “toxic Black masculinity” into individuals since their childhood and that there is a lack of news coverage and scarce resources. Further, there is a need to make transparent the investigative process into murders of trans women of color. Another map raised questions about policies, organizations, power, privilege, experiences, statistics, and media that normalize sexual assault (see fig. 1). A third map noted that shame and stigma are ways that individuals perpetrate sexual assault within families, communities, society, and media. Counter-narratives to the normalization of sexual assault, such as gathered through the use of the hashtag #MeToo, boldly challenges the social mechanisms of shame and stigma that have kept women silent about the sexual assault that too many have suffered. A fourth participant highlighted racism as a form of injustice while noticing more overt racism and discrimination, given the current climate within the United States (see fig. 2). We discussed how racism functions at both individual and

institutional levels and how individuals perpetuate racism through institutional structures, processes, norms, and expectations, as well as individual attitudes and behavior. Moreover, racism is further complicated when entangled with classism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. Dismantling racism will compel all to unlearn existing patterns of behaviors and become aware of the unconscious values, beliefs, and assumptions we possess so that we may effectively participate in and sustain racial justice work.

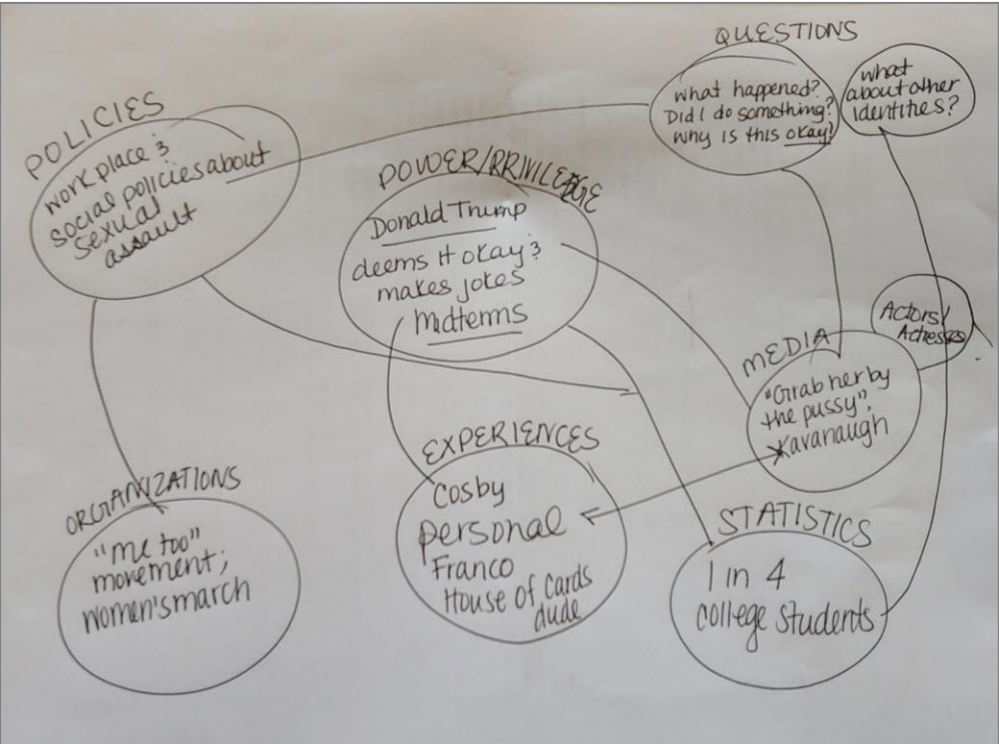


Fig. 1. Sexual assault map.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION

We conclude our essay with an invitation to meet with others to dialogue and map injustice, revealing the entanglement and histories of oppression that has become normalized. Intersectionality has served as a critically important theoretical lens in feminist and gender-related studies to

analyze injustice and the oppression of minoritized groups. Recognizing that multiple and intersecting identities inform the social realities and lived experiences of individuals and groups, intersectionality considers how various power structures such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference intersect and interact simultaneously in the lives of those perceived as being different from the majority (e.g., Black women). Mapping entanglements of complexly interwoven, twisted, and tangled parts of minoritized identities and intersecting inequalities helped participants to begin to untangle the threads of systemic injustice to consider actions that might develop feminist activism collectively.

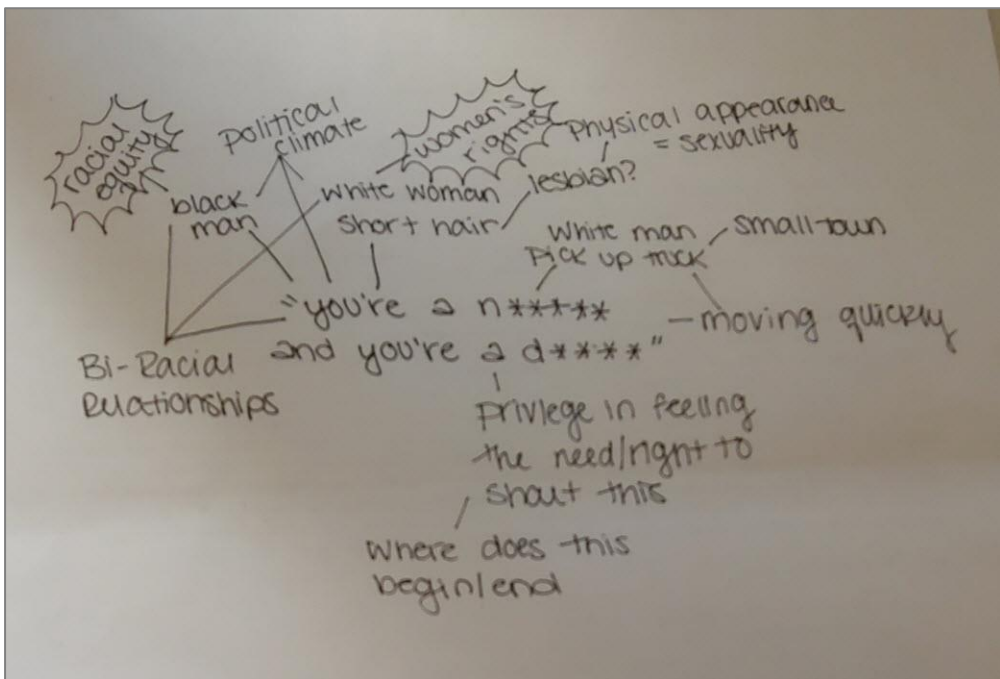


Fig. 2. Racism map.

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