Report

Women in Philosophy:
Why Race and Gender Still Matter
Notre Dame of Maryland University
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On Saturday, April 28, 2012, the Society for Women in Philosophy (Eastern Division) held its annual conference on women in philosophy at Notre Dame of Maryland University. The Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) dedicates itself to honoring and enabling women philosophers in any field of philosophy, and this year the Eastern Division (ESWIP) conference focused especially on intersectionality.

“Intersectionality”, the difficult yet productive attempt to theorize categories such as race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality together, has been a conceptual framework for more than a decade in the U.S. academy, yet it is almost entirely absent as a recognized philosophical theme or framework within the larger discipline of philosophy. Indeed, intersectional scholarship in both analytic and continental philosophy has yet to be recognized in a substantive manner. Intersectional approaches are inherently interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary, drawing on numerous areas of contemporary philosophical investigation: postcolonial philosophy, critical race theory, feminist and GLBTQ philosophy, and philosophy of disability. Nevertheless, such work has yet to receive widespread recognition and legitimacy in

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professional philosophy. For example, while feminist theory and feminist theorists have succeeded in making inroads within the discipline, the gains (anthologies, encyclopedias, tenure-track positions, etc.) have privileged white feminism and white feminists, often excluding women of color. A possible explanation for the reluctance of professional philosophers to embrace intersectionality is the fact that the various disciplines and approaches that constitute intersectional frameworks are internally complex and often have fraught relations with one another. For example, postcolonial and critical race studies have often ignored feminism, and almost all of these fields ignore disability studies. Give this complicated terrain, ESWIP hoped to organize a conference that celebrated the successes of intersectional, philosophical work while remaining cognizant of the challenges facing those who adopt such frameworks. As a result, ESWIP dedicated itself to recognizing and promoting intersectional scholarship in philosophy, as well as intersectional frameworks that drew on philosophy in other disciplines—such as political science, education, law, art and history. Building bridges between philosophical fields, as well as between philosophy and other disciplines, honors the contributions of intersectional scholarship. More significantly, such bridges provide critical tools from a variety of disciplines and theoretical frameworks to meet the challenges that remain.

In order to receive submissions from a wide range of scholars, we advertised our call for papers in multiple and varied venues. These included numerous listservs, blogs, websites, social media sites, as well as targeted emails to organizations and individuals with a demonstrated interest in at least one dimension of intersectional analysis. These venues were extremely successful in soliciting a wide selection of submissions. The twenty-eight papers chosen for the program covered a wide range of topics and themes—specifically we had sessions on epistemic injustice; identity; race and gender; freedom and equality; women in philosophy; motherhood and sexuality; moral innovation; and analytic and continental approaches to intersectionality. We were especially pleased to receive submissions from graduate students doing innovative work, and to have a small number of undergraduate students in attendance, since part of SWIP’s core mission is to nurture and mentor younger scholars attempting to gain a foothold in an exclusionary and traditional discipline. We were disappointed not to receive submissions that focused specifically on disability theory, economics and transnational women’s movements, indigenous communities, or climate change. We determined,
therefore, that for our next conference we would advertise our call for papers in venues that would garner such contributions.

Dr. Donna-Dale Marcano, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, and an alumna of Notre Dame of Maryland University, accepted our invitation to deliver the keynote address: “Whiteness and Women of Color in Feminist Theory or Considerations of Race and Sex Analogies in Contemporary Feminism”. Dr. Marcano centered her talk on a concrete example of the tensions facing those doing intersectional work. As a participant in the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival over the years, Marcano has come to appreciate the opportunities for networking that the festival offers—primarily via ‘tents,’ or covered spaces, designated for certain groups. In the last few years, controversy has arisen over one of these, the black womyn’s tent. Given the excellent work being done in critical race theory, work that questions the nature and existence of blackness as a clearly identifiable, physical trait, some of the more academically-minded participants of the festival have challenged the need for such a tent. According to Marcano, a number of vocal objectors have argued that the tent reifies a socially constructed category that has proven to be damaging to those to whom it is applied. Yet, at the same time, many attendees of the festival, in particular those who identify as black, defend the ongoing presence of the tent as necessary, perhaps even more necessary than in the past, as a refuge and private space for black women to meet and share their experiences while at the festival. For Marcano, what is significant is that it is mainly non-black identified women calling to abolish the tent, and largely black-identified women demanding that it remain. In exploring the controversy through an intersectional lens, Marcano shed light on how and why race can indeed be socially constructed while at the same time being ‘real’ enough to mark off certain individuals as different, and in need of private, black-only, supportive environments. The festival’s response has been to create a ‘front porch’ for the black womyn’s tent, where those who wish to can meet and discuss ongoing concerns. Such controversy is not new to the festival—for many years the trans (-gender and –sexual) community and its supporters have been protesting the festival’s policy of allowing only “womyn-born-womyn” to attend¹, with at least one objector describing the policy as a relic of second-wave feminism: «There

are some sincere lesbian and feminist folk with the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF) who seem sincerely misguided, and stuck in the feminist identity politics of the 1970’s when it comes trans women’s identities being fully included in the community of female identities.«² As mentioned above, such tensions between (white) feminism and other dimensions of intersectionality are an ongoing challenge to those who wish to see intersectionality accepted, and employed, more widely in the discipline of philosophy.

To provide a snapshot of the diversity of additional offerings on the conference program, and to illustrate the ways in which employment of an intersectional framework generates novel analyses and new tools for dismantling oppression, we include summaries of seven representative presentations.

In “Nonsense as Discourse: The Continuing Importance of Critical Race and Feminist Analysis”, presented by Dr. Jeanine Weekes Schroer and co-authored with Dr. Melissa Kozma, Schroer and Kozma interrogate the function of ‘purposeful nonsense’ in expressions of political ideology. When purposeful nonsense is passed off as simply bad or absurd discourse, it conceals the ways that it employs a variation on the phenomenon known as ‘stereotype threat.’ To illustrate their claims, they draw on the recent anti-abortion campaign targeting African-American women (including billboards that state “The most dangerous place for an African-American child is in the womb”). They argue that purposeful nonsense ordinarily subverts critical engagement, but critical race and feminist analyses contextualize it, potentially disrupting its harmful influence.

Dr. Iveta Jusova’s presentation, “Intersectionality and Continental Feminist Philosophy: Rosi Braidotti’s Recent Work”, begins with an overview of Dutch politics, with particular attention to the deployment of “embedded feminism” and “homonationalism” by neo-liberals. Jusova argues that both strategies pit issues of sexuality against culture, rather than treating them as intertwined, seemingly disentangling ethnicity-based causes of (unacceptable) behavior from those generated in response to sexism or homophobia. The end result is continued, unquestioned advancement of anti-Muslim and anti-immigration agendas. Jusova recommends employing Braidotti’s philosophy

and practice to suture the social schisms generated by such polarizing Dutch politics.

Marie Draz, in her presentation “Transitional Subjects: Gender, Race, and the Timing of the Real”, argues that contemporary accounts of gender, race, and state should not ignore how sex literally becomes the property of the state. Draz juxtaposes the history of such doled out realness for transgender “claims to the real” with the history of biopolitical administrative systems that create and maintain racial categories. When cisgendered queer feminists dismiss transgender understandings of embodiment, they reveal the whiteness of queer feminist accounts of embodiment. Draz argues that we cannot understand the relationship between gender and the state without an intersectional framework that attends to racialized-gendered subjection.

Historical analysis takes center stage in Professor Kristin Waters’ paper, “Past as Prologue: Intersectional Analysis in Nineteenth Century Philosophies of Race and Gender”. She contrasts the multivariable analysis standards of other disciplines (that require representative populations in their studies) over and against the way that the field of philosophy permits the absence of such oversight. She argues that the intersectional approach, which is a pre-requisite for black women social and political philosophers, ought to be required for all philosophers who theorize on human activities.

In “Intersectionality and [White] Feminist Philosophy: Problems, Projects and Prospects”, Dr. Alison Bailey explores personal and disciplinary reasons why white feminist philosophers have not enthusiastically engaged the radical work being done in intersectionality. In her presentation she identifies four projects that could contribute to creating a feminist critical race philosophy. These projects include self-reflexivity on the part of white women feminists and the willingness to: (1) interrogate the ways we may cling to theoretical abstractions and concepts at the expense of cultivating relations with other groups of women and their lived experiences; (2) step outside of the safe theoretical spaces where whiteness is centered (classrooms, conferences, workshops, roundtables, etc.) in favor of locations that can better challenge the irreconcilable material differences between the lives of white women and women of color; (3) consider the ways that we all exist as multiple selves, and that our character as white women feminists is legitimately viewed and received in ways be-

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3 This presentation was loosely based on Alison Bailey’s earlier work (Bailey 2010. This chapter can be downloaded electronically at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1609862.)
yond our own construction of that character as good, well-meaning, and decent; and, finally, (4) confront some very real fears about white feminist philosophy’s philosophical authority and the fragility of the feminist philosophical canon, when that canon has been built exclusively in a way that undermines plurality and intersectionality.

Heather Rakes’ paper, “How Race and Gender Matter: The Case for Intersectionality in Feminist Philosophy”, addresses the unequal terms of conditionality for happiness. According to Rakes, the happiness of long-tenured, white, straight, nondisabled, (secularized) Christian, cisgendered men comes first in philosophy departments. Their philosophical conditions for happiness determine what is deemed a philosophical pursuit, which excludes queer feminist of color work on histories of intersectional theory. Evidence of the exclusion Rakes describes is found in the relatively large numbers of women philosophers and philosophers of color (versus white, male philosophers) who leave academic philosophy for other, more welcoming disciplinary homes—women’s studies and Africana or black studies most frequently—and the persistently low rate of tenure in philosophy for women and persons of color.4

Finally, the controversial decision to verify Caster Semenya’s sex through chromosome testing after her victory at the 2009 World Track and Field Championships motivates Dr. Janine Jones’ analysis in “Caster Semenya; Reasoning Up Front with Race”. Jones utilizes this event to show how some intersectional theorists mistakenly ‘bring in’ race, when, instead, in cases similar to this one, race must be understood as intervening prior to the construction of sex/gender status, not subsequent to its invention. Jones argues that Semenya’s case fails to live up to its oft touted contribution to intersectional work, that of providing an ideal case for challenging a realist view of sex, gender, and race. Instead, a more careful reading of the controversy supports claims such as Marcano’s, that race is not equivalent to, but prior to, gender in impacting lived experience.

In conclusion, the response to the publicized conference program, by those unable to attend, and to the conference itself, by attendees, was overwhelmingly positive. For example, one participant wrote:

It was – by far – one of the best conferences I have ever attended, and the

4 See The APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy, Vol. 08, No. 2 (Spring 2009) and Gines (2011) for detailed discussions, with data, and analyses of the situation facing women and blacks in philosophy, respectively.
setting – at such an historic women’s college – was the icing on the proverbial cake. I especially appreciated the diversity of analytic, continental, and historical approaches amongst the papers. I couldn’t believe the level of appreciation for each others [sic] work that was shown during the Q&A – in spite of this diversity.

Another expressed her gratitude for our giving intersectionality center-stage:

I just wanted to thank you for organizing a wonderful conference on a topic that needed to be addressed. My sense is that this will give rise to a new, revitalized discussion of intersectionality and may even change the direction of the discourse.5

In addition, two presses have contacted the organizers, both wanting to publish the conference proceedings in book format. Much of the success is attributable to the intersectional theme, as well as to the history and reputation of SWIP as a welcoming and supportive place for women philosophers to explore and develop new ways of thinking.

Today’s ESWIP aims to continue the legacy, through conferences, panels at major professional meetings, and awards celebrating distinguished women philosophers, of providing for women philosophers the kind of support and empowerment so aptly described by Claudia Card in her essay “Finding My Voice”:

A second stage of feminist awareness began when I connected with the Midwest Society of Women in Philosophy (SWIP), two years after the CR [consciousness-raising] group disintegrated ... I was able then to ‘come out’ in my work and at my workplace, thereby also becoming less vulnerable ... I began integrating my ‘life’ with my work ... The CR group, SWIP, and, later, women’s studies helped me heal and heard me into speech, enabling me to find and develop my voice as a philosopher. (Card 2003, p. 45)

REFERENCES


5 Both quotations are from private email correspondence between the conference organizers and participants.