

## Book Review

### **Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality**

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More than a decade later, after being placed in the camp of intersectionality 'critic' by her peers, Jennifer C. Nash, in *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), revisits some of her initial thoughts about the usefulness of intersectionality in an attempt to reframe black feminism's engagement with this now widely appropriated feminist theory. In *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), Nash ventures to provide an alternative to the defensiveness and territoriality that she claims has characterised the 'complicated and contentious relationship between intersectionality and women's studies', and in turn women's studies' tense relationship with black feminists (Nash, 2019: 2).

In her seminal article, 'Re-thinking intersectionality' (2008), Nash interrogates the assumptions underpinning intersectionality as an analytical tool for black feminists, identifying 'four tensions within intersectionality scholarship: the lack of a defined intersectional methodology; the use of black women as quintessential intersectional subjects; the vague definition of intersectionality; and the empirical validity of intersectionality' (2008: 1). Nash poses the question of whether black feminists and anti-racist scholars have become overly reliant on intersectionality, bordering on dogmatism.

Acknowledging that intersectionality has been the analytic tool of choice that feminist scholars have used for theorising oppression over the past couple of decades, Nash now is advocating for an expansive and deterritorialised conception of intersectionality that is inclusive of subjects beyond the 'black woman' (Nash, 2019: 32). Nash proposes that when theories such as intersectionality are considered lost, stolen, appropriated, or institutionalised for various ends that they may not have been intended for, this hinders their potential as analytical tools because the starting position has already become one of defensiveness. For Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, seeks to 'encourage and imagine other ways of feeling black feminist, other ways of being black feminist and doing black feminist labor in the academy that eschew defensiveness and its toxicity' (Nash, 2019: 32).

The book has obvious merits within the field of women's studies, making a timely contribution to feminist discourse and scholarship on intersectionality, Nash also attempts to provide a balanced yet challenging account of how intersectionality has traversed the broader multi-disciplinary landscape, particularly stemming from its roots as a legal concept. In chapters one and two, Nash unpacks the history of what she terms the 'intersectionality wars', noting that she has been positioned within the discourse as a 'critic' of intersectionality. Nash then problematises the inclination to polarise positions as either for (supporting of) or against (critical of) the centrality of intersectionality within (black) women's studies.

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In chapters three and four, in an attempt to address the risk of intersectionality becoming dogmatic in approach and application, Nash reimagines alternatives for what it could mean to go beyond intersectionality (in its current articulations) as the main frame of reference for black feminists. After opening *Black Feminism Reimagined* with a concern for how, in the current North American context, black experience and subjectivity is increasingly being theorised through the death of black men and grieving of black women (Nash, 2019: 22), Nash then closes chapter four with a request that we reject 'both the notion that blackness is synonymous with death and the idea that black feminism is dead or dying' (Nash, 2019: 129). This rejection does not require a complete disregard for the value of intersectionality, but rather an acknowledgment of its limitations that ultimately allows for a space to reimagine black feminism through love and letting go, rather than through defensiveness and possessiveness.

How Nash reimagines black feminism is the main theme of this book. As scholars, we should be cognisant of colonial approaches to knowledge, especially in viewing knowledge as property. Particularly in relation to intersectionality, as stated in chapter one, '[T]he language of colonization, often paired with commodification, positions intersectionality as a territory that has been wrongfully, problematically, and even violently taken by outsiders' (Nash, 2019: 44). By proposing a reimagining of black feminism as 'letting go', Nash invites an alternative beyond intersectionality as 'belonging to' black feminism, toward a broader understanding of black feminist theory as grounded in love and vulnerability.

Black feminism as love goes beyond just the personal as political, because it acknowledges that the personal is also vulnerable. Through love there is vulnerability and mutual regard for the 'other'. Nash proposes that we move love from primarily rooted in the personal, towards a theory or conception of justice that considers mutual vulnerability and witnessing (Nash, 2019: 116). Justice, as it is framed through policy and law, invites further interrogation of the connections between black feminism and law. Within this reimagining, law can be a site for black feminism's 'loving practice' (Nash, 2019: 114). For Nash, her 'engagement with law seeks to rescue law's status of death in black studies, tracing how it can be a location of radical freedom- dreaming and visionary world-making rather than simply a death world and the paradigmatic site of antiblackness' (Nash, 2019: 130).

Advocating for an ethics of vulnerability, Nash makes interesting assertions in relation to love, justice, intersectionality and law. She proposes that intersectionality, as 'an analytic that radically occupies law', be pushed toward a commitment to witnessing and empathy, that 'takes hold of legal doctrine and refuses its conceptions of neutrality and uniformity as performance of justice' (Nash, 2019: 129). I would have found more value in this contribution to reimagining if Nash spent more time delving deeper into what this reimagined framing through love, and a commitment to witnessing and empathy, could look like within the legal or juridical space.

In closing, Nash points to the political conditions within the American university and how this frames the lives of black women both within and outside of the US academy. *Black feminism reimagined* comes at a time when a call for reimagining is echoed across various disciplines as a response to the rise of right wing populism in the USA and globally. Reimagining is optimistic and hopeful, it is a useful response to the negative outlooks that can influence scholarship at this time. The pessimistic hailing of the 'demise' or 'death' of black feminism, reminds me of similar pronouncements of the death of the university or the university in ruins, which have led to calls for a reimagining of the university, of scholarship, pedagogy and curricula, and of higher education more broadly. Nash's contribution is a brave intervention into such debates.

## REFERENCES

Nash, J. C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89, 1-15.

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