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TITLE

**Beyond multiculturalism and 'difference': thoughts on gendered
approaches to 'ethnic' and 'racial' issues in the twenty-first century.**

In this paper we offer a critique of the relevance and limitations of the categories 'race' and ethnicity within gender scholarship in the twenty-first century. We revisit the debates over these categories undertaken by feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s and suggest that, when we use them to try and increase our knowledge and understanding, we struggle to make them work. Although we acknowledge the political resonance of these categories, we are concerned with their analytical limitations. Our critique involves an examination of the 'difference' discourses of 1980s feminism and their concern with 'identity'. Although the idea of 'difference' has no one connotation, its implications of plurality and multiplicity have been regarded as providing a necessary antidote to the previously unquestioning use of unified terms. 'Difference' has been seen as offering a way of decentring and analysing complex sets of meanings. It not only challenges passive labels, such as those of 'black woman' or 'white woman', it transcends such classifications, thereby suggesting alternative subject formationsⁱ.

Between the mid-1980's and the mid-1990's there was vigorous feminist engagement with questions of 'race' and gender. At that time debate tended to focus on two particular issues: the primacy of gender as a defining analytical concept and the extent

to which 'difference' also needed to be taken account of in understanding people's lives. Other dimensions of 'difference', in addition to those of gender and 'race' were also acknowledged, including sexuality, disability, ageing and social class. However, there was particular emphasis on the argument that 'race' and 'ethnicity', (often used interchangeably), were significant axes in constructing both women's sense of self and their life chances. The stimulus for this debate came from two directions; 'women of colour' in the United States [as they came to term themselves] interrogated the ethnocentric bias and white-centredness of American feminist thought and practice; women from former colonial areas and areas of post-colonial migration sought to incorporate their experiences of colonial legacies and ethnic minority/migrant status in western Europe and North America into that thought and practice. This stimulated a range of work in historical, cultural, and social scientific studies seeking to explore gendered aspects of the colonial past, of migration experiences, of social difference, and of cultural representation. The main thrust of this scholarship was to work to incorporate analyses of ethnic inequity and discrimination, or of constructions of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance, into analyses of gender difference and disadvantage within material, political, and cultural formations, whether past or present. It often argued for the need for gendered approaches to issues of development and racism, as well as for proper attention to the 'racial' and 'ethnic' dynamics of gender and the condition of women. Their historical context was the UN 'Decade of Development', the growth of 'identity'-based social movements and communal politics in western Europe, and the emergence of feminist debates about 'difference', identity, and unequal power. It was also associated, in parts of the west, with the celebration of diversity and an emphasis on the political and theoretical potential of multicultural approaches to social analysis and action

These contexts have changed and become more complex in the last 10-15 years. In studies of both the colonial past and of the multi-cultural present the binary distinctions of gender and race, black and white, western and oriental, colonial rulers and colonial subjects have been challenged and modified. Contests over the faults/achievements of Condoleeza Rice in 2005, like those of Anita Hill in the 1990's, suggested that the rather muted interest in questions of class in relation to African-Americans might have some force in the politics and understanding of 'race' and gender. These women were seen by some as admirable examples of achievement against gender and race disadvantages, but by others as products and agents of class and political divisions among women and African Americansⁱⁱ. A wide range of scholarship on colonialism's cultures and histories and their contemporary legacies has illuminated the agency of colonial subjects and post colonial migrants within relations of colonial or ethnic subordination. Bhabha's conceptual development of notions of hybridity has proposed a theoretical alternative, which has been paralleled by the emergence of a politics and culture of self identification and practice among the second and third generations of the post-colonial migrants to the west as 'black British', Asian-American etc.ⁱⁱⁱ Cultural fusions in popular music, fiction, and television have been a striking feature of this process in the UK, alongside multi-ethnic football teams across western Europe. They co-exist with much harsher strands of conflict over migration and cultural difference and over the vested interests and aspirations embodied in the movements and politics inherited from the earlier period.

While people have always moved across borders shaping and re-shaping nations and states, in recent years it has been the global nature of this movement which has become so distinctive. Migration today has huge economic and social consequences and has become central to both domestic and international politics. Millions of people are seeking work, a new home or just a safe place in which to live outside their countries of origin to the extent that commentators have referred to the current period as 'the Age of Migration'^{iv}. Further, the gendered nature of these migration patterns is now being recognized. Phizacklea, for example, has critiqued the invisibility of gender in much of the extant literature. Attention is increasingly being turned on the trafficking of women, their

role as sex workers and their significance as nannies, maids and domestic workers across the globe^v.

Another crucial shift has been the emergence of 'faith communities' as constitutive entities in social and political self-identification and in media representation. With assertive 'religious' [as opposed to 'secular'] Zionism, 'Hindutva' politics in India, evangelical Christian politics in the USA, as well as the role of religion in the communal politics of former Yugoslavia or of religion in the communal politics of European cities, reference to religious affiliation as central to ideology but also to communal and political identity has come to the fore. From debates on the role of religion in education to unprecedented global mass coverage of the death of a religious leader [the Roman Catholic Pope] and the choice of his successor, 'religion' now has a far stronger presence in the public sphere than during most of the twentieth century. Whatever the 'non-religious' interests, experiences and aspirations these 'religious' references might in reality incorporate, they have staked powerful claims to construct social identities and divisions and been able to mobilise practical and ideological support. For social and cultural analysts this poses the question of how to address such religious categories. In particular, it challenges feminist scholars to find an epistemological ground on which they can hear and respect some women's own self-identification with and through religion, while reflecting on and critically analysing such choices.

Most striking among these uses of 'religion' as an organising category have been the various political and cultural movements in the Middle East and Europe, which have defined themselves by reference to Islam, taking over much of the energy of older anti-colonial, anti-racist, populist and nationalist movements. The growth of Hamas as against other sections of the Palestinian movement, the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood and the creation of other Islam-centred movements in Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Malaysia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Indonesia have diverse causes and forms but in all cases used religious difference as their core signifier. This process has interacted with a revival of European and north American focus on 'Islam' and 'Muslims' as objects of obsessive, and predominantly negative, attention. This began with the impact of the 'Islamic' revolution of 1977-82 in Iran and 'western' reactions to the theocratic regime which stabilised itself there thereafter and continued with responses to the conflict in Algeria in the 1990's and to the establishment of the 'Taliban regime' at the turn of the millennium. The events of 11th September 2001, the Anglo- American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the construction of 'Muslim terrorism and the 'war' against it as prime concerns of the one remaining superpower have fuelled reliance on the binary opposition of 'Muslim' [as embattled victim or dangerous Other] and 'non-Muslim' [which could mean western, infidel, American, or oppressor].

These developments have posed interesting challenges for feminist thought and gender scholarship. How do we understand the active participation of women in movements and ideologies which emphasise the unity, common interests, and solidarity of a 'faith' community rather than gender equity or women's interests? To what extent would we argue that 'religion' is a useful constitutive category for the investigation and interpretation of identity, inequity, and difference in social relations, structures, processes, or institutions, rather than an ideological or cultural 'effect'? Within Middle Eastern societies and among diasporic scholars of 'third world' origin there are sharp debates on these questions and on whether one can conceptualise, for example, 'Islamic feminism'^{vi}. The considerable intellectual and political energy [as well as propaganda] expended on discussing the significance and values of female dress codes among Muslim communities [as opposed to their poverty or legal and financial autonomy] is another case in point.

It is our contention that the changes and challenges we have described require new ways of thinking about the issues involved. To return to our arguments at the beginning of this paper, the idea of 'difference' has been important in two senses. First, in highlighting the wide variety of experiences which women might have according to their particular positionings in relation to difference, it has helped to deconstruct the idea of 'woman' itself.

Second, this deconstruction was suggestive of a range of subjective identities (rather than the idea of some unified self), together with inherent pluralism and fluidity. However, this emphasis on identity, and the identity politics said to follow from it, presents problems. One is that it fails *to transcend* difference, leading to a piecemeal, pragmatic issue-based approach to analysis and practice. (Some might call this the postmodern formula). Another is that it can frequently overlook distinctions *within* particular groups. Moreover, with some notable exceptions, there is a general failure to acknowledge that there are several ways of conceptualizing 'difference', for example, at the level of individuals, groups or as a systematic form of social relationship^{vii}. The boundaries of 'difference' need to be recognized as fluid and changing, rather than as static and immutable. Commentators have also critiqued a perceived over-emphasis on 'culture' arising from links between discourses of 'difference' and those of multiculturalism. Hierarchies of cultural power might be overlooked, and their relationship to material and political power underestimated, not to mention the danger of defining 'others' in terms of their difference from some putative normative position. During the 1990s, therefore, a number of feminist scholars have developed the idea of 'intersectionality' as one way of addressing these difficulties^{viii}.

The idea of intersectionality has developed largely out of work by Critical Race Feminists in the US. It is seen as approach which attempts to go beyond binary or oppositional analyses and towards an understanding of the ways in which the ideological, political and economic systems of power reinforce each other. Crenshaw, for instance, uses the term to explore the various ways in which 'race' and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black American women's experiences. She argues that: 'many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of 'race' or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women, race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately^{ix}. This highlights the need to: 'account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed^x. The argument is that identities of ethnicity, gender, 'race' and class, among others, interconnect and that we need to recognize that there may be as many differences within such categories (for instance age, culture or faith) as there are between them. The idea of intersectionality, then, refers to the complex relationships of social identities in relation to difference. More recently, metaphors, such as those of 'crossroads', 'intermeshing' and 'traffic' have been explored in order to emphasize this^{xi}. 'Race', ethnicity, gender, class etc. are the avenues of power that define the social, political, economic, cultural and social map. They are the routes along which the dynamics of both 'disempowerment' and 'empowerment' travel. Although we may consider them separately for analytical purposes, in lived experience they tend to converge, overlap and cross, hence the traffic analogy. This creates the complex intersections where two or more of these axes might meet. Such interconnections might be analysed at the level of the socially constructed group or of the individual. Essed, among others, for example, has used this approach to articulate problems around women's human rights and what she refers to as 'everyday discrimination'^{xii}. There has been significant interest, generally, in the social justice applications of the approach. Additionally, ideas about intersectionality have also been influenced by postmodern feminist theory, postcolonial studies, Black feminism and queer studies in attempts to challenge identity demarcations and intensify a focus on hybridity, process and transformation.

Notions around intersectionality provide a critique of the use of categories like 'race' and 'ethnicity', which are treated as fixed human attributes rather than as outcomes of human choice, process and activity. Frantz Fanon is credited with first coining the term 'racialization' to point to the ways in which conceptions about 'race' and the structural conditions associated with them influence and de-limit life chances and experiences^{xiii}. Feminists, and others, have developed the concepts of racialization and racialized practices as more fruitful alternatives to notions of 'race' and 'ethnicity', although it is worth noting that they have been used in very varied ways^{xiv}.

By racialization we refer to the diverse ways in which images, ideas and assumptions about 'race' become embedded and expressed in people's thoughts and actions. Such processes involve not only the oppression of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups but also the active promotion and defence of the power and dominance of the privileged. Three examples will illustrate these points. The current politics of migration focus on the supposed 'racial' identities of migrants rather than addressing the many material, cultural and political circumstances leading people to move from one community to another. Western obsessions with Islam and Muslims ignore the fact that it is a world religion with adherents in many cultures and societies, associating it instead with 'Arabs', 'Chetchens' or 'Afghans'. Debate about HIV/AIDS has often targeted 'foreigners' and ethnic 'others' as carriers of this condition. In each of these cases we can see a complex issue infused with racial images and themes. Our argument here is that we are looking at a *process* of deploying racial terms rather than a discussion about 'race'.

What are the implications of this for gender scholarship? By emphasizing questions of process we can make sense of women's lives and choices by attending to their intersectional positioning in relation to racialized discourse and practice, as well as other influences. For example, it is helpful to analyse the role of women in the transnational sex industry and sex trade in terms of the racialized and gendered influences on their movements as migrants. This enables us to understand the lives and choices of east European women trafficked to western Europe, as well as those of young girls facing 'rehabilitation' after their experiences in the Lord's Army in Uganda. Similarly, we can evaluate the choices of Egyptian or Turkish women about their styles of dress and body covering in terms of their affirmation of 'belonging' to a faith or community and their self-empowerment, as well as of the 'orientalist' controversies that this provokes. This allows us to consider in a more developed fashion the contradictions of Islamic feminism, populist nationalism, and anti-westernism, as well as lazy western assumptions that Islam 'oppresses' women, all of which can be associated with those choices.

We see some major advantages to shifting to this approach. It enables scholars of gender and women to listen to the voices and views of those they are studying, while exploring those voices and views reflectively. For instance, a feminist scholar can engage respectfully with the commitments of both Palestinian and Israeli women, while also reflecting on the potentially racialized aspects of each subject position. Likewise, we may begin to understand the ways in which racialization resonates with gender in migrant women's sense of belonging, particularly in the context of displacement. It also facilitates the analysis of women's lives and experiences at every level from the individual to the transnational. Working with the concept of intersectionality, we can understand the gendered and racialized dynamics of migration which underlie the experience of a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong or California at a number of levels, from the intimate practice of household care to the role of immigrant communities and transnational flows of labour. Seeing this experience in terms of the processes of gendering and racialization offers better tools for multi-level analysis of the 'chain of care'^{xv}, extending from the Filipina's 'home' of origin to her 'home' as a migrant, than rigid categories of gender and race.

Finally, we would argue that the approach we are describing allows scholars of gender to explore creatively the fluctuating role of gendered and racialized influences on the experience and outlook of particular women in particular times and places. When Anita Hill charged Judge Clarence Thomas with sexual harassment in 1991 'black' American women's responses expressed varying degrees of gendered and racialized positions. For some, the feminist agenda of naming a harasser constructed Hill as a heroine and a sister to be supported; for others, the fact that she was accusing a 'black' man about to be appointed to the highest court in the US judicial system made her a traitor to her 'race'; for others, again, it was a question of party loyalties to Democratic or Republican political interests; for none of them were racial issues absent. By making process central to the analysis of this situation we can do justice to the different degrees of gendering and racialization in the

perceptions and discourse of the various participants. In doing so for this and other situations, we may hope to move towards a fruitful and appropriate framework for gender scholarship and analysis in the twenty-first century.

ⁱ A. Brah (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora* (London: Routledge)

ⁱⁱ B. Greer (2005) Condoleeza Rice, *New Statesman*; T. Morrison (ed) (1993) *Race[ing] Justice, Gender[ing] Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* (London: Chatto and Windus)

ⁱⁱⁱ H. K. Bhabha (1994) *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge); S. Hall (1989) New Ethnicities in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents 7 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts)

^{iv} S. Castles and M. Miller (1998) *The Age of Migration* (Basingstoke: Macmillan)

^v A. Phizacklea (2000) Gendered Actors in Migration in J. Andall (ed) *Gender and Ethnicity in Contemporary Europe* (Oxford: Berg)

^{vi} H. Afshar (1994) *Why Fundamentalism? Iranian Women and their Support for Islam* (University of York: Department of Politics Working Papers); H. Afshar (1998) *Islam and Feminisms: an Iranian Case Study* (Basingstoke: Macmillan); D. Kandiyoti (1991) *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Macmillan); F. Mernissi (1996) *Women, Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (London: Zed Books); H. Moghissi (1999) *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Zed Books)

^{vii} Brah *Cartographies of Diaspora*

^{viii} F. Anthias (1998) Rethinking Social Divisions: Some Notes Towards a Theoretical Framework, *Sociological Review*, 46, 3. 506-35; K. W. Crenshaw (1994) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Towards Women in M. Fineman and R. Mykitiuk (eds) *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (New York: Routledge), www.hsph.harvard.edu/grhf/WoC/feminisms/crenshaw.html (accessed on 26. 4. 05); N. Yuval-Davis, F. Anthias and E. Kofman (2005) Secure Borders and Safe Haven and the Gendered Politics of Belonging: Beyond Social Cohesion, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, 3, 513-35

^{ix} Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins, 2-3

^x Crenshaw, *ibid.* 3

^{xi} Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, Secure Borders and Safe Haven

^{xii} P. Essed (nd) Towards a Methodology to Identify Converging Forms of Everyday Discrimination, www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/essed45.htm (accessed on 26. 4. 05)

^{xiii} D. T. Goldberg and P. Essed (2002) Introduction in D. T. Goldberg and P. Essed (eds) *Race Critical Theories* (Oxford: Blackwell)

^{xiv} K. Murji and J. Solomos (eds) (2005) *Racialization. Studies in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

^{xv} A. R. Hochschild (2000) Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds) *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism* (London: Jonathon Cape)