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## Editor's Note

Naomi Smith



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A central component to critical race theory, the term “intersectionality” was coined by American lawyer and intellectual Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>1</sup> in 1991 to describe the “multidimensionality” of the Black woman’s experience in the United States. It describes how an individual’s different identities – such as race and gender identity – intersect and overlap to create compound, interdependent systems of disadvantage and discrimination. Crenshaw argued that “the “intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw, 1991; 1244). For example, a white woman may experience sexism and misogyny, and a Black man may experience racism, but a Black woman will experience both, often simultaneously. All three experience discrimination – and consequently, disadvantage – but in

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<sup>1</sup> While Crenshaw is typically credited with the first use of the term “intersectionality”, scholars have noted (Collins & Bilge, 2021) that it had existed as a concept for some time before it was given a name as women of colour – both within and outside the academy – formed movements and bodies of theoretical work that challenged formations of power like colonialism, sexism and racism. The work of Black, Chicana (Mexican American), Asian American, and indigenous women in the 1960s and 1970s – especially as Black women began to assume leadership roles in the civil rights and Black Power movements in the USA – helped to begin to develop intersectional theory, grounded in praxis, as they become increasingly involved in developing grassroots movements based on intersectional ideas.

different forms and to varying degrees. This special issue of *Dandelion Journal* asks what role intersectional identities have in the arts, and what can we learn from studying lived experiences in the arts through an intersectional lens? In our call for papers, we invited postgraduate researchers and established academics to consider these questions – and more – within their individual disciplines and research foci, and to look towards a decolonised future in the arts, however that might look.

This deliberately broad brief elicited a range of submissions from researchers working in multiple disciplines under the umbrella of “the arts”; and whose work is located in a diverse range of political, cultural and geographical contexts (Britain, Italy, Iran). In ‘Rethinking Identity with Second-Generation Female Writers’, Dalila Villella and Michela Valmori examine the impact of second-generation Italian female writers in the post-structuralist and post-colonial debate. Using the work of Gabriella Kuruvilla and Somali-Italian author Igiaba Scego, they consider how we might complicate essentialist Western concepts of identity and challenge our understanding of the second-generation female experience in Italy. They detail the myriad ways that Scego explores the very notion of identity and belonging, and the discomfort experienced by migrant women attempting to reconcile their multiple identities – in Scego’s case as an Italian, a Somalian, an immigrant, a woman, etc – and how they intersect with one another, all filtered through the lens of a society that essentialises identities and demands a performance of “Italian-ness”.

In ‘From #Me Too to Women Life and Freedom: The Multidimensionality of the Woman’s Experience in Iranian Society Fighting their Rights’, Shahriar Khonsari and Mahdieh Toosi explore the potential limits of the #MeToo framing in the struggle for women’s rights in the non-Western world. The #MeToo movement, they argue, is situated in a uniquely Western context, having developed in the United States to raise awareness of issues of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace, before spreading to the rest of the world, including the United Kingdom and Iran. The movement is credited with giving visibility to the scope of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace – particularly the entertainment industry – in the United States and around the world. It is defined by “a push for accountability, including examining power structures in the workplace that had enabled misconduct, and, in some cases, renewed efforts to seek justice for survivors through criminal and civil court systems” (Brittain, 2023). Crucially to Khonsari and Toosi’s paper, the most recent form of the movement is typically considered to have gained momentum following reports of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein, and is considered to be a moment of accountability for white men in powerful positions in the entertainment industry. Using the case of Zar(Zahra) Amir Ebrahimi – a young Iranian woman actor, who became popular in the mid-noughties for her role in an Iranian soap opera – they explore whether the framework developed by the #MeToo movement can be applied in non-Western countries, where gender and women’s rights may be understood differently.

Finally, in “Let’s Talk About Hair and Art”, Black British artist Nicole Moore reflects on the personal and political underpinnings of her 2020 mixed media fine artwork *Hair Power*, and the importance of representation within the visual arts. Moore’s very personal work speaks to

a secondary interest that we had in putting this issue together; i.e. exploring the potential for digital publishing to take us away from Westernised traditions and preconceptions of what constitutes “academic” publishing and the typical format of academic journals. In other words, how can we use the advantages of the digital format to interrogate the typical definitions of what qualifies as academic production, knowledge and publishing in the West? And how can we use it to challenge, disrupt, deconstruct and reconstruct those notions? Moore’s work eschews the passive voice typically employed by Western academics – distancing themselves from their work, and presenting a sometimes false veneer of objectivity – in favour of the first-person narrative voice, privileging the wisdom of lived experience and acknowledging the impacts of the author’s subjectivity, while simultaneously retaining academic rigour. Moore’s written work is accompanied by examples of her art, including *Hair Power*, and a podcast of a wide ranging discussion, recorded at our issue launch event as part of Birkbeck’s 2023 Arts Week<sup>2</sup>. This use of visual and auditory media as forms of knowledge production and dissemination, not just illustration, allow us to explore using different forms of intellectual production that do not solely rely on an understanding of the typical Western academic lexicon and grammatical structure, which can at times be prohibitively rigid and exclusionary.

These seemingly disparate papers bring academics from film studies, literature and fine art together to consider how intersectional identities are constituted, understood, and constructed and deconstructed in different disciplines in the arts sector and in a variety of geographical contexts. Rather than starting a new conversation, they represent a continuance in a conversation and theoretical approach – although still grounded in praxis and the hard realities of producing fine art, film and literature – begun in the 1970s, and which has become increasingly of interest to scholars around the world. These are not new ideas or conversations, however new they may seem to mainstream, Western academia, that has arguably had its eyes closed to these issues for far too long. Women from marginalised communities – women of colour, queer women, migrant women, etc – both academics and not, have been having these conversations and discussing these concepts for decades. Simultaneously, the ideas examined and critiqued within this issue remain as applicable today as when they originated in the Black Power and civil rights movements of mid-twentieth century America.

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### **Bibliography**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/annual-events/arts-week/arts-week-2023>

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