Against Silence as Violence:
De- and Re- centering Gender-based Violence through Intersectionality as Interconnectedness

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is reconstructing the complex path of intersectionality as an approach enriching and enlarging the conceptual framing of Gender-Based Violence (GBV from now onwards) through a concurrent analysis of multiple forms of inequalities, oppression and discrimination, usually silenced and (made) invisible. Such a reconstruction will consist of three steps.

First, the reconstruction of the peculiar path of intersectionality, from practice and activism to theory and back, until the official entry in the OED in 2015 (Perlman 2018), more than two decades after its appearance in literature (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

Secondly, intersectionality allows to go beyond the sole GBV, at once de-centering and re-centering the role of gender by a series of affiliated motives/origins of violence and oppression. It is not a matter of listing multiple sources of inequality, rather the way multiplicity is framed through accumulation, intersection and interlocking, as well as "asking the other question" as critical method (Lutz 2024).

Third, intersectionality as a concept will be re-framed looking at the weight and violence of classification systems and their consequences: inclu-exclusion, orphanage and infrastructural violence based on "layers of silence", torquing of individual and collective lives, and marginalization of borderlands and multiple vulnerabilities (Star and Strauss 1999; Bowker and Star 1999). If silencing the margins can worsen GBV, mapping and giving them a voice (hooks 1984) can trace a path to enhance strategies of prevention and care.

Silence is a form of communication (Watzlawick Beavin and Jackson 1967), largely unavoidable and unintentional. However, it can be a powerful and opaque form of violence, especially in complex information infrastructures (Bowker and Star 1999). As silence constructs otherness and invisibility, its violence can take multiple forms as well,

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as in the enforced cancellation of DEI policies at the beginning of Trump's second term (Ng et al. 2025).

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1.Introduction

Since its initial and 'official' formulation across the fields of legal practice in civil rights and critical race theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989-1991, the concept of intersectionality has characterized the transformation of the Feminist field through the dialectical and conflictual confrontation between Western mainstream feminism and Black/Post colonial feminisms, where the plural is compulsory to describe and analyze the heterogeneity internal to the movement.

The concept has become both the basis of Intersectional Feminism and of a distinct field of study (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; Davis and Lutz 2024a), gaining increasing popularity not only in academic and scientific circles as a theory and practice compass, but also as a source of inspiration for action and collective movements.

Crenshaw's key intuition that social identities configure themselves as multiple, cumulating with power and intertwined oppression structures in a non-linear way, rather through interactive connections and simultaneity of interlocking patterns, has evolved over three decades.

Of course, such structures of power and oppression are strongly interlinked to violence and especially GBV, and affect multiple, marginalized identities at risk of suffering and further marginalization in vulnerable social contexts. Therefore, the concept of intersectionality can be of inspiration in a variety of fields, for example to understand conceptualizations of vulnerability, ranging from resilience in the context of climate change (Chaplin, Twigg and Lovell 2019) to public health issues and medicine (Bowleg 2012).

Such a ductility and flexibility of the concept of intersectionality has been questioned within the feminist movement and its multiple, transnational and transatlantic articulations, in the end configuring intersectionality as a 'traveling theory' (Davis and Lutz 2024b) at risk of constant misunderstanding, 'originalism' (Nash in May 2024), and willful ignorance or erasure (May 2024) of its deep and complex Black Feminist roots elaborated in the US.

First of all, this paper briefly reconstructs the peculiar path and multi-level history of intersectionality (par. 2), going back to Crenshaw's formulations and the core issues raised in the literature about the conundrums and dilemmas of commodification of intersectionality as a buzzword and umbrella concept, and the lack of contact and loyalty to its Black feminism origin.

Secondly, this contribution aims to precise the specificity of de-and re-centering the category of gender to understand the phenomenon of GBV in an intersectional manner (par. 3), shifting the perspective from a single axis of analysis to an intersectional perspective, and emphasizing the consequences of this shift in terms of agency, policy and practice against GBV.

Indeed, the core argument of this paper is that the main lesson of intersectionality is about interconnectedness, namely on the one hand, not silencing anymore multiplicity, heterogeneity and impurity as opposed to fragmentation, purity and centralized control; on the other, enabling mestizaje as practice to resist the reduction of multiplicity (Lugones 1994). Silence is a form of involuntary, inevitable communication (Watzlawick, Beavin

and Jackson 1967), but can become a subtle form of violence, very difficult to identify and recognize. Silencing Otherness and reducing reality to a single category is at the basis of forms of domination, orphanage and suffering in information infrastructures (Bowker and Star 1999), built upon classification systems and standardization processes which exclude and marginalize borderlands and multiple belongings/identities.

Therefore, the fourth paragraph of this paper is dedicated to a cross-fertilization between the concept of intersectionality, *mestizaje* (Lugones 1994) and concepts rooted in the field of Science and Technology Studies, such as non modern hybrids (Latour 1991); cyborg and partial perspective (Haraway 1991, 1988); monsters and borderlands (Bowker and Star 1999). All of them allow to frame multiplicity and heterogeneity as instances crucial to re-articulate power, oppression and inequalities but also to contrast the suffering of perpetual exclusion constitutive of classification systems.

Eventually, the fifth paragraph tries to go further in relation to the concept of infrastructural violence, re-formulating it as more than inherent to big infrastructures, spatial justice and urban settings (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012; Truelove and O'Reilly 2021), as a phenomenon related to information infrastructures and the *torquing* of individual and collective lives subjected to the various and sometimes stubborn contradictions of classification systems, as in the classification(s) of race under the South African Apartheid regime (Bowker and Star 1999: chapter 6). GBV can emerge and be exacerbated by forms of infrastructural violence, misclassifications and willful erasure of categories, as in the case of the cancelling of DEI policies and lemmas from administrative information systems at the beginning of the second Trump term, in January-February 2025 (Ng et al. 2025). Intersectionality as a word was banned along with many other key words concerning gender, equity and diversity, and non binary gendered language, recognizing two sexes only (Wendling and Epstein 2025). Such an act(ion) produces a meta silencing and a form of pervasive infrastructural violence, an impoverishment of the articulation of the public debate which envisages new forms of oppression and inequality and calls for new forms of resistance and mestizaje.

Data and sources for this article were selected through a literature review oriented by key concepts and founding authors, updated to the latest collective works in the field. Further methodological approach is the intersection with other fields, and the comparison of different conceptual frames to-think GBV considering 'other' questions and categories, in line with Matsuda's "asking the other question" method (see Lutz, 2024).

2. A peculiar path: from practice to theory and codification, and the way back to policy

Few facts and dates about intersectionality can configure the complexity and non-linearity of the path which shaped "what has rightfully been called feminism's most famous travelling theory" (Davis and Lutz 2024b: 11).

First, intersectionality was added as an entry from the sociology field to the Oxford English Dictionary only in 2015 (Perlman 2018), even if its first coin dates to Crenshaw's seminal article on "demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex" (Crenshaw 1989). And it is codified as follows: "The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise" (Oxford English Dictionary 2015).

Compared to the recent, quick adding of buzzwords such as 'post truth', 'woke', and 'cancel culture', the official acknowledgement of this concept came very late despite its transnational circulation (see Davis and Lutz, 2024b).

Secondly, the roots of the concept pertain to a longer history of Black women activism dating back to 19th century, as in the case of Sojourner Truth's 1851 discourse 'Ain't I a Woman' quoted by Crenshaw (1989), and many other Black women (see May 2024), whose missed or insufficient recognition brings about many conflicts and debates in the context of intersectionality studies as a field (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). To the list can be added the male pioneer sociologist W.E.B DuBois, who "(…) in works, including *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and *Damnation of Women* (1920), (…) broke new ground by analyzing class, race, and gender interactions (…) Du Bois prefigured intersectionality and critical race paradigms. (…) [whereas] [white sociology ignored how systems of domination interlocked, reproducing social inequality" (Morris 2020).

However, it is only in the late '80s that Kimberlé Crenshaw, in two fundamental articles (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), put a milestone on the critique towards White Western Feminism from the perspective of critical race studies and legal activism.

"Crucial for Crenshaw's framing of the concept is the interaction of the macro level (inequality structures functioning as social positioning) with the micro level (subjective experiences of discrimination and identity formation as an excluded group). In summary, it was the analysis of the specific socioeconomic situation of black women in the US which made it possible for the first time to speak of the simultaneity and mutual co–constitution of different categories of social differentiation, and to emphasize the specificity of the experiences shaped by these interactions" (Lutz 2016: 424).

Intersections are multiple, diverse and differently interlocked. As Crenshaw put it, "My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991: 1245). The issue at stake, as I will show in par. 4, is the multiplicity of levels, grounds and configurations of identity, all shaped by power, discrimination and oppression in structures of inequality.

Black women's condition is co-constitutive of intersectionality:

"With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis (…) This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw 1989: 140).

Through two metaphors of the everyday, the horizontal one of the traffic intersection, and the vertical one of the basement (Hoffart 2024), Crenshaw (1989) made visible the multiple sources of discrimination which subjugate Black women, opening since then a long "quest for the right metaphor", which according to Hoffart (2024) seems to obey to the need "to transcend the additive dimensions of the original conceptualisation in Crenshaw and lead[s] us to more (and more) complex accounts of categorical interrelatedness" (Hoffart 2024: 147).

Along with this metaphorical and theoretical dimension, intersectionality has evolved as an increasingly complex field, a critical method (Lutz 2016, 2024; Colombo and Rebughini 2022) and a ground for practice and policy, tracing back (not always faithfully, see May 2024; Davis 2024) to its antidiscriminatory and Black feminist theoretical origins. One of the most debated issues is the necessity to keep alive Black feminist and activism

role both in the past and currently, whereas European and white reception/appropriation of intersectionality has been often accused of commodifying and "de-coupling" the concept from its Black background (see Davis 2024; May 2024). However, as pointed by Davis (2024: 327, 329) "(…) the very willingness to uproot, displace and transform are integral to any feminist enquiry. (…) Proprietary notions that intersectionality belongs to one author or to a particular school of thought or a specific geographic location should be abandoned in favour of understanding and thinking critically how theories travel and in doing so take on different meanings and are used for different purposes".

3. De- and re-centering gender in GBV: a matter of methodology

Putting intersectionality at the centre of GBV means de-and re-centering gender in discourses, practices and policies against violence. This means going beyond an only-gender gaze, by following the "Asking the other question" method (Davis and Lutz 2024c) and "violence beyond the experiences of women alone (…) [which means] to mostly focus on the experiences of white, cis-gender women, reflecting the perspective of what is presented at the "ideal" survivor (…) and leaving the assumptions behind the conflation of "violence against women" and "gender-based violence" unquestioned" (Humbert and Strid 2024: 5).

Therefore, when moving toward an intersectional perspective on GBV, there is a methodological and analytical shift in considering how forms of inequalities are affected by the different power dynamics which characterize social relations.

In other words, "(…) the meaning, strength and effects of individually experienced categories depend on their specific inter-section, and the specific contexts of interaction. Gender, class, and 'race' – to consider the basic categories of many reflections on intersectionality – are not defined in unitary and static terms but acquire meaning and relevance as 'social facts' in the connections that they mutually establish from time to time" (Colombo and Rebughini 2022: 224).

Assuming the Feminist perspective of violence as a *continuum* (Kelly 1988 in Lieber 2023) and acknowledging the multiple forms of inequalities within diverse social relations, an intersectional approach to GBV can increase awareness of factors "that may contribute to disadvantages, vulnerabilities, and differential consequences" (Humbert and Strid 2024: 5).

Intersectionality allows to go beyond the single-axis (gender itself) approach, not only recognizing multiplicity and diversity of violence and its victims (apart from women and girls) but also and above all enabling a more effective contrast of discrimination, racism and patriarchy (see Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality configures itself as a methodological approach and especially as an "analytical sensibility" (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013: 795), where categories are "heuristic devices" (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013: 786), more than too static, reified or unstable structures of difference (Humbert and Strid 2024).

Putting GBV at the centre of an intersectional approach and vice versa means also recognizing the enduring transformative path of violence, from an individual and casual analysis to a systemic, structural and multifaceted continuum, where psychological, economic, cultural, symbolic and infrastructural dimensions are strongly interconnected to multiple structures of oppression.

As Crenshaw noted 25 years ago, violence has to do with identity and identity politics in particular: "This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of

African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" (Crenshaw 1991: 1241). And this since "the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, an-other problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women. (…) Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (Crenshaw 1991: 1242).

Contrasting this resistance to intersections and moving against either/or proposition is the ultimate scope of an intersectional approach to GBV: only by de-centering gender, this category can be re-centered, and conceptualizations, discourses, practices, policies against violence be enriched. "Through these processes, images of victims of gender violence become significantly more diverse and analyses of their experience simultaneously broader and more focused" (Creek and Dunn 2011: 319).

4. Framing multiplicity and heterogeneity: intersectionality and STS

To consistently offer a simultaneously broader and more focused analysis of intersectionality, I now turn to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) to go in depth into the issues of multiplicity and heterogeneity which constitute the core theoretical components of intersectionality as a sensibility and a methodological approach.

Going into cyberfeminist approaches (Haraway 1991) and the ecology of information infrastructures in which classification and its consequences has a crucial role (Bowker and Star 1999), I will show how different images of intersectionality can benefit from and fit other debates. Putting at the centre the very conceptual and methodological core of intersectionality - multiplicity, impurity, hybridation - I carry out a brief overview of how metaphors of intersectionality can be reinterpreted through STS frames, going beyond the temptation and the limit to transcend additivity and to reach a "pure impurity" (Hoffart 2024: 148).

Not by chance, "The logic of impurity, or mestizaje, provides us with a better understanding of multiplicity, one that fits the conception of oppressions as interlocked" (Lugones 1994: 475). How can this be preserved and maintained, not expunging "the need for messiness" (Hoffart 2024: 148) as an appropriate posture towards intersectionality and politics of identity?

The cyborg configuration along with the privilege of the partial perspective (Haraway, 1988, 1991) is a good path to reach such an objective, as much as the study of classification and its consequences in terms of generating residual categories, orphans of infrastructures and monsters in borderlands (Bowker and Star 1999). Why so?

Crossing boundaries among what is human, animal, and artificial is the core of Haraway's political cyborg manifesto (1991), a multiplicity constituted by "the intermingling of people, things (including information technologies), representations, and politics in a way that challenges both the romance of essentialism and the hype about what is technologically possible. It acknowledges the interdependence of people and things, and it shows just how blurry the boundaries between them have become" (Bowker and Star 1999: 301).

The very act of crossing boundaries, categories and identities is constitutive of intersectionality, too. "Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (Crenshaw 1989: 149). This very popular and vivacious metaphor, even if charged with additivity, is particularly evocative. "By metaphorically visualising black women's experience of discrimination as the experience of being run over by traffic from multiple directions, Crenshaw provided particularly evocative imagery to accompany her analyses of legal cases in the USA (…)" (Hoffart 2024: 140).

Crossing an intersection, therefore, means also to go beyond purity. Intersection is mixed up, at the crossroads of blurred categories, what Lugones names as mestizaje (Lugones 1994). In this respect, a convergence between Lugones and Latour's non modernity (Latour 1991) can be traced. Artificiality and fictionality are the core of modern Constitution according to Latour: the paradox of non modernity is just the proliferation of hybrids, which are denied and at the same time increasingly inevitable as abstract, artificial dichotomies and separations through which modernity affirms itself (Latour 1991). Accordingly, Lugones pointed out that "The urge to control multiplicity expressed in modern political theory and ethics is an understanding of reason as reducing multiplicity to union through abstraction, categorization, from a particular vantage point (…)". (Lugones 1994: 464). In this sense, fragmentation is deeply connected with domination, since "The urge for control and the passion for purity are conceptually related" (Lugones 1994: 465). A politics of heterogeneity is, therefore, necessary and, above all, inevitable. It is also constitutive of agency "as the outcome of a plurality of interrelated dimensions that produce different, sometimes contradictory and always changing social locations (…)", in which intersectionality can have a methodological value in recognizing the ambivalence of the structure-action and the power of situatedness (Rebughini 2021: 6). Intersectionality, therefore, overcomes the violence of silencing heterogeneity, multiplicity and plurality, in a world where "no one is pure. No one is even average. And all things inhabit someone's residual category in some category system" (Bowker and Star 1999: 300).

5. Layers of silence, torquing and orphanage: infrastructural violence and intersectionality

Since classification systems contain privileges and discriminations and raise struggles and conflicts by silencing otherness through metrology (see the case of tuberculosis, Bowker and Star 1999: chapter 5) there is a form of constitutive infrastructural violence, inherent in the hospitalization system but traceable in other settings as well. In the case of tuberculosis, "Patients begin observing how other patients are treated. There is a complex edifice of privileges in tuberculosis hospitals based ostensibly on how well the person is perceived to be" (Bowker and Star 1999: 180). Furthermore "Both physicians and patients struggle to find a standard and to localize it, in the face of a constantly shifting interpretive frame" (Bowker and Star 1999: 182). Silencing otherness in standards and during standardization movements is a form of constitutive infrastructural violence, generating what Leigh Star acutely defined as orphans of the infrastructure, at constant risk of exclusion and suffering because they belong to multiple communities of practice, life trajectories and struggles. Theirs is a kind of monstrous existence, conducted in an idiosyncratic time, a border terrain constructed and maintained through trajectories and twists which create a strong tension between the topology of body-

life and the typology of classification. Such a tension is coped with negotiations from which a constant risk of torquing arises (Bowker and Star 1999: 191).

Since multiplicity and heterogeneity are the rule, not the exception, and pervasiveness of classifications and infrastructures (the human need for ordering) marginalizes this evidence, there is a basic need to question the purity of categories so to recognize the production and reproduction of monsters and borderlands, as in Donna Haraway's cyborg (1991).

I propose here to reconsider intersectionality as a crucial antidote to torquing and *situated infrastructural violence*, a concept elaborated in urban settings departing from the evidence that "Infrastructure can be a key means through which social improvement and progress is distributed throughout society. A key conceptual challenge, then, is to understand when it is that infrastructure becomes violent, for whom, under what conditions and why (…) infrastructure is not just a material embodiment of violence (structural or otherwise), but often its instrumental medium, insofar as the material organization and form of a landscape not only reflect but also reinforce social orders, thereby becoming a contributing factor to reoccurring forms of harm" (Rodgers and O' Neill 2012: 402-403).

Infrastructural violence, therefore, points to the potentially deleterious consequences of infrastructure as a privileged channel to (re)distribute power and regulate society by hindering multiplicity and heterogeneity.

What does an intersectional approach say to the understanding of these dynamics, given that infrastructure works on an installed base, is relational and ecological, and visible upon breakdown (Star and Ruhleder 1996)?

The crossroad of intersectionality, STS approach of ecological infrastructures and GBV can be very fruitful, emphasizing the dynamics of gendered power in the context of complex sociomaterial assemblages. This is the case of a sanitation infrastructure in Indore (India), where an intersectional approach reveals the production of gendered shame before and after "making the India's cleanest city" (Truelove and O' Reilly 2021). The complex intertwined infrastructure of urban sanitation crosses, intersects and is entangled within race-gender-class-caste locations, resulting into "Gendered bodies, specifically those of lower-caste women, (…) [as] the disproportionate subjects of new policing tactics that made the physical and affective experiences of already inadequate sanitation in predominately poor and informal settlements even worse" (Truelove and O'Reilly 2021: 731-732).

As Star and Strauss point out with reference to computer mediated work, "On the one hand, visibility can mean legitimacy, rescue from obscurity or other aspects of exploitation. On the other, visibility can create reification of work, opportunities for surveillance, or come to increase group communication and process burdens" (Star and Strauss 1999: 9) The same can happen in the complex and tremendous layering of silence, visibility and invisibility which textures *intersectional infrastructural violence*. The concept of "articulation work" as "*invisible to rationalized models of work*" (Star and Strauss 1999: 10, original emphasis) can be of interest to understand how in the subtle intertwining of (in)visibility, intersectionality can make visible forms of silencing and articulation work which would otherwise be obscured. In this regard, it is of the greatest importance to note that intersectionality as a term was banned and the DEI policies in the US were targeted at the beginning of the second Trump mandate (January-February 2025), with the risk of "widening existing inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups that depend on these programs for support and representation. The executive orders have

deepened political polarization surrounding DEI (…) the suppression of DEI-related activities within the USA is changing conversations about fairness and equity beyond its borders. This not only hampers constructive dialogue but also obstructs collaboration on vital issues of social justice" (Ng et al. 2025: 139). The same issue of GBV as a topic of research and public policy is at risk as "the executive order attempts to preclude gender identity minorities in the United States of America from operating as self-determining, agentic subjects and positions them as objectifiable bodies to be defined, categorized and regulated by and through the state" (Ng et al. 2025: 142).

Therefore, new forms of infrastructural violence and torquing emerge through the silencing and cancellation of intersectionality from public administration vocabulary, calling for a new and more effective agency in the field of GBV and its entanglements with intersectionality, heterogeneity and multiplicity banned through formal political acts.

Policy and practice implications concern a more accurate design of classifications and evaluation systems in policies against GBV. Keeping such systems more open to multiplicity can empower the reach and scope of policy and practice. Preserving spaces of autonomy and action from below for situated policies is also of the greatest importance to contrast the emerging backlash and meta-silencing operations running in the current US context.

6. Conclusions

The core issues raised in this contribution deal with the relationship between intersectionality and GBV. Intersectionality is a heuristic approach, developed through a complex path oscillating among practice, policy and theory, as well as a method rooted in Black feminist movements, then successfully widespread and adapted transnationally as a travelling theory.

Intersectionality is of the greatest importance as it allows us to overcome the silencing and reduction of multiplicity, recognizing Lugones' mestizaje as the way towards a politics of heterogeneity where intersections, interlocking and overlapping structures of oppression and discrimination can be recognized and made accountable. In so doing, GBV can be at once de- and re-centered, shifting from a single-axis analysis to a more complex, situated and plural account of multiple and intertwined forms of violence.

By drawing on concepts from the STS field, such as ecological infrastructures, cyborg, and non modernity, multiplicity is considered as the core of intersectionality, the possibility to go beyond and against silence as violence, namely silence as invisibility, orphanage, monsters and borderlands emerging from multiple memberships on the boundaries of classification systems which, by definition, create exclusion, suffering and torquing.

Intersectionality questions the purity of categories and the constant need to classify, to put order as a form of domination which generates and exacerbates GBV and violence at large.

Drawing from intersectionality studies and STS, the concept of situated and intersectional infrastructural violence is proposed for future and further research, to understand the complex intertwining of GBV in classification systems and sociomaterial infrastructures, especially with reference to the cancellation of DEI policies by Trump administration in early 2025.

The issue of silence as a form of violence and classification systems as originating torquing and orphanage is more urgent than ever, in front of the banning of the very words

and terms which define and constitute theories, practices and policies against GBV, from 'gender' to 'intersectionality', to DEI itself.

The act of erasure, as it was with Black women and their lives and identities, again calls for a resistance to take in account multiplicity and mestizaje in an affirmative way, a politics of heterogeneity as the basis of a renewed intersectionality approach to confront with multiple forms of violence.

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