Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful

Kathy Davis

Feminist Theory 2008; 9; 67
DOI: 10.1177/1464700108086364

Intersectionality as buzzword

A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful

Feminist Theory
Copyright 2008 ©
SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, and
Singapore)
vol. 9(1): 67–85.
1464–7001
DOI: 10.1177/1464700108086364
http://fty.sagepub.com

Kathy Davis *Utrecht University*

Abstract Since its inception, the concept of 'intersectionality' – the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination – has been heralded as one of the most important contributions to feminist scholarship. Despite its popularity, there has been considerable confusion concerning what the concept actually means and how it can or should be applied in feminist inquiry. In this article, I look at the phenomenon of intersectionality's spectacular success within contemporary feminist scholarship, as well as the uncertainties and confusion which it has generated. Drawing upon insights from the sociology of science, I shall show how and why intersectionality could become a feminist success story. I shall argue that, paradoxically, it is precisely the concept's alleged weaknesses – its ambiguity and open-endedness – that were the secrets to its success and, more generally, make it a good feminist theory.

keywords *critical race theory, difference, feminist methodology, postmodern feminist theory, theoretical closure, theory generalists and specialists*

The occasion for this article was a two-day seminar on the subject of 'intersectionality' that I recently gave during a visiting stint at a university in Germany. To my surprise, the seminar, which was originally intended for a small group of women's studies students, drew interest from Ph.D. candidates and colleagues from cities throughout the region, all prepared to sacrifice their weekend and put aside their language difficulties (the seminar was in English) in order to participate. While this interest in my course was obviously gratifying, it was also puzzling. Why the sudden concern with 'intersectionality', I wondered? My curiosity increased as I discovered that most of the participants were not at all sure what the concept meant, let alone how it should or could be used in their own fields of inquiry. At the same time, however, they were all convinced that intersectionality was absolutely essential to feminist theory and they had no intention of 'missing the boat'.

In this article, I explore the secret of intersectionality's remarkable

success in contemporary feminist scholarship, given the confusion which the concept evokes among those who would most like to use it in their own research. 'Intersectionality' refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality was intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse. Crenshaw argued that theorists need to take both gender and race on board and show how they interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences.[1]

Intersectionality has since been heralded as the 'most important contribution that women's studies has made so far' (McCall, 2005: 1771). Feminist scholars from different disciplines (philosophy, social sciences, humanities, economy and law), theoretical perspectives (phenomenology, structuralist sociology, psychoanalysis, and deconstructionism) and political persuasions (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, queer studies, disability studies) all seem to be convinced that intersectionality is exactly what is needed. It has generated heated theoretical debates throughout the US and Europe, becoming a standard topic in undergraduate courses, graduate seminars and conferences in the field of women's studies. Special issues of feminist journals and anthologies are currently appearing, devoted to exploring the theoretical complexities of intersectionality.

Today, it is unimaginable that a women's studies programme would only focus on gender. Textbooks and anthologies in the field cannot afford to neglect difference and diversity among women (although opinions differ about the best way to approach the issues). It is *bon ton* for women's studies professors to ask their undergraduate and graduate students to reconsider the topics of their research in the light of multiple differences. Learning the ropes of feminist scholarship means attending to multiple identities and experiences of subordination. Feminist journals are likely to reject articles that have not given sufficient attention to 'race', class, and heteronormativity, along with gender. At this particular juncture in gender studies, any scholar who neglects difference runs the risk of having her work viewed as theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical.

Ironically, however, while most feminist scholars today would agree that intersectionality is essential to feminist theory, judging by the discussions which have emerged around the concept, scholars seem to share the same confusion that the participants of my seminar exhibited. Some suggest that intersectionality is a theory, others regard it as a concept or heuristic device, and still others see it as a reading strategy for doing feminist analysis. Controversies have emerged about whether intersectionality should be conceptualized as a crossroad (Crenshaw, 1991), as 'axes' of difference (Yuval-Davis, 2006) or as a dynamic process (Staunæs, 2003). It is not at all clear whether intersectionality should be limited to understanding individual experiences, to theorizing identity, or whether it should be taken as a property of social structures and cultural discourses.

This raises the question how a theory which is so vague could come to be regarded by so many as the cutting edge of contemporary feminist theory. And does it need – as some have argued – a more coherent conceptual framework and methodology in order for it to live up to its potential and to grasp the complex realities it was initially intended to address (McCall, 2005)?

In this article, I look at the phenomenon of intersectionality's spectacular success as well as the uncertainties which it generates. I shall not be providing suggestions about how to clarify the ambiguities surrounding the concept, nor how to alleviate uncertainties about how it should be used. Quite the contrary, I shall be arguing that, paradoxically, precisely the vagueness and open-endedness of 'intersectionality' may be the very secret to its success. To this end, I draw upon insights from the sociology of science.[2] This branch of sociology is concerned with processes of scientific activity, the relationship between theories and their audience, and, more generally, how a specific theory or theoretical perspective can persuade an (academic) audience to view some aspect of the world in a certain way.

In particular, I shall be turning to the work of Murray S. Davis who, several decades ago, produced two – in my view – sadly underrated articles called, respectively, 'That's Interesting!' (1971) and 'That's Classic!' (1986).[3] In these articles, he explored what enables a specific social theory to capture the imagination of a broad audience of academics. Borrowing from phenomenology and the rhetoric of science, he analyses how theories that are widely circulated or are 'in the air' (1971: 312) come to be viewed as interesting by their audiences and, in some cases, even go on to achieve the venerable status of 'classic'. He draws his examples from the grand theories of sociology (Marx, Durkheim, Weber), but his arguments can be applied to any theory – including, as I shall show, feminist theory. Davis is not concerned with whether a specific theory is good (as in valid or able to adequately explain certain aspects of the social world) or coherent (in terms of the logic of its propositions or consistency of its arguments). Indeed, he argues that no theory ever became famous because it was 'true' or coherent. Quite the contrary, in fact. Davis claims that successful theories thrive on ambiguity and incompleteness. Successful theories appeal to a concern regarded as fundamental by a broad audience of scholars, but they do so in a way which is not only unexpected, but inherently hazy and mystifyingly open-ended.

At first glance, intersectionality would appear to have all the makings of a successful feminist theory.[4] Leaving aside the issue of whether intersectionality can be treated as a full-fledged 'theory', I shall take a closer look at what it is about intersectionality that has allowed it to 'move' the minds of a broad audience of feminist scholars, not only whetting their interest, but compelling them to enter into theoretical debates and look for ways to use the concept in their own inquiries. Drawing upon Davis's explanation for what makes a theory successful, I shall investigate the seeming paradox between the recent success of intersectionality within feminist theory and the confusion that it generates among feminist scholars about what it actually is and how to use it. More specifically, I explore the features of

intersectionality that account for its success: its focus on a pervasive and fundamental concern in feminist theory, its provision of novelty, its appeal to the generalists as well as the specialists of the discipline, and its inherent ambiguity and open-endedness that beg for further critique and elaboration. After addressing the secret of intersectionality's success within contemporary feminist theory, I raise the question of whether embracing such a chimerical and – some would argue – scientifically unsound[5] concept should be only a reason for celebration or also a reason for some alarm.

Fundamental concern

According to Davis (1986), the first characteristic of a successful social theory is that it speaks to a primary audience concern. It needs to be recognizable as 'imperative', 'crucial', or 'key' to understanding something that a particular audience holds near and dear. This concern must, in fact, be so pervasive that in order to be successful at all, a theory will simply have to address it (p. 287).[6] But, Davis (1986) warns that in order to be fundamental, a concern must not simply be shared by a broad and disparate audience of scholars. It also needs to address a problem which collides with something that the audience holds dear – something which – as he puts it – 'is about to destroy their ideally immovable valued object' (p. 290). This provides the context of desperation necessary to compel an audience to invest time and energy into trying to get the problem under control, thereby eliminating the source of their anxiety (p. 290).

'Intersectionality' addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women. The very fact of differences among women has become the leading subject of feminist theories in recent years. This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions (Zack, 2007: 197). Intersectionality addresses precisely the issue of differences among women by providing a 'handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it' (Phoenix, 2006: 187). At the same time, it promises to address (and redress) the exclusions which have played such a distressing role in feminist scholarship through the (deceptively) easy procedure of 'asking the other question':[7]

> The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call 'ask the other question.' When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interests in this?' (Matsuda, 1991: 1189)

Intersectionality brings together two of the most important strands of contemporary feminist thought that have been, in different ways, concerned with the issue of difference. The first strand has been devoted

to understanding the effects of race, class, and gender on women's identities, experiences, and struggles for empowerment. It has been especially concerned with the marginalization of poor women and women of colour within white, Western feminist theory. Initially, this strand of feminist theory adopted a 'triple jeopardy' approach to class, race and gender (King, 1988) by exploring how, with the addition of each new category of inequality, the individual becomes more vulnerable, more marginalized, and more subordinate. Gradually, however, the focus shifted to how race, class and gender interact in the social and material realities of women's lives to produce and transform relations of power (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Anthias, 1998; Collins, 2000). Intersectionality seemed ideally suited to the task of exploring how categories of race, class and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive, giving centrality to questions like how race is 'gendered' and how gender is 'racialized', and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class.

While intersectionality is most often associated with US Black feminist theory and the political project of theorizing the relationships between gender, class, and race, it has also been taken up and elaborated by a second important strand within feminist theory. Feminist theorists inspired by postmodern theoretical perspectives viewed intersectionality as a welcome helpmeet in their project of deconstructing the binary oppositions and universalism inherent in the modernist paradigms of Western philosophy and science (Phoenix, 2006; Brah and Phoenix, 2004). Critical perspectives inspired by poststructuralist theory – postcolonial theory (Mohanty, 1988; Mani, 1989), diaspora studies (Brah, 1996), and queer theory (Butler, 1989) – were all in search of alternatives to static conceptualizations of identity. Intersectionality fit neatly into the postmodern project of conceptualizing multiple and shifting identities. It coincided with Foucauldian perspectives on power that focused on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories (Staunæs, 2003; Knudsen, 2006). Intersectionality seemed to embody a commitment to the situatedness of all knowledge (Haraway, 1988), promising to enhance the theorist's reflexivity by allowing her to incorporate her own intersectional location in the production of self-critical and accountable feminist theory (Lykke, 2005).

While the issues of difference and diversity were important both to the political project of exploring the interactions of race, class and gender and to the deconstructive project of postmodern feminist theory, they also evoked some uncertainty among feminist scholars about the viability of the feminist enterprise in general. If the 'old' ideal of an inclusive feminism – the 'common world of women' scenario, as Mohanty put it – is abandoned as theoretically and politically ethnocentric and imperialistic (Lugones and Spelman, 1983; Mohanty, 1988), where were feminist scholars to find a platform unified enough to warrant labelling their theoretical enterprise 'feminist'? However tarnished the ideal of inclusivity has become, feminist theory still needs a theoretical and normative platform if it is not to disappear altogether.[8]

Intersectionality not only promises to address the 'fundamental and

pervasive concern' of difference and diversity, but it does so in such a way that the old feminist ideal of generating theories which can speak to the concerns of all women can be sustained. It coincides with the need to problematize the theoretical hegemony of gender and the exclusions of white Western feminism, and yet it provides a platform for feminist theory as a shared enterprise. It promises an almost universal applicability, useful for understanding and analysing any social practice, any individual or group experience, any structural arrangement, and any cultural configuration. Moreover, it can – by definition – be employed by any (feminist) scholar willing to use her own social location, whatever it may be, as an analytic resource rather than just an identity marker. Intersectionality offers a new *raison d'être* for doing feminist theory and analysis. The success of intersectionality is, therefore, at least in part, attributable to the implicit reassurance it provides that the focus on difference will not make feminist theory obsolete or superfluous.[9] On the contrary, intersectionality suggests that there is still important work to be done, and – luckily for all of us – we are the ones to do it. In other words, intersectionality promises feminist scholars of all identities, theoretical perspectives, and political persuasions, that they can 'have their cake and eat it, too'.

Novel twist

The second characteristic of successful social theories is that they provide a novel twist to an old problem. According to Davis (1971), social theories flourish precisely because they manage to 'deny . . . the assumed while affirming the unanticipated' (p. 343). Successful theories capture the attention of an audience by disputing or unsettling something that it had previously believed. They make unexpected connections between unlikely events in ways that the audience could not have imagined before (pp. 310–11). In contrast, theories that merely confirm what the audience already knows (or thinks it knows) are bound to be dull. At best, they may be useful, as, for example, is the case with countless overviews which promise to offer a systematic view of the canon of social theory. While such overviews are undoubtedly handy, particularly for giving undergraduates a sense of what a field is about, they are unlikely to evoke exciting theoretical debates among other scholars. Theories that merely confirm what we already know tend to have a short shelf life. They are seldom cited and most likely to end up gathering dust among piles of other, similarly dutiful, but not particularly interesting, theoretical overviews. In order to become a successful theory, a different trajectory is required. The audience has to be alerted to the fact that this is something new and different, something so surprising that it requires their attention and engagement.

At first glance, intersectionality might not seem to fit the bill. After all, it was hardly a new idea. Kimberlé Crenshaw may have introduced the term,[10] but she was by no means the first to address the issue of how Black women's experiences have been marginalized or distorted within feminist discourse. Nor was she making a particularly new argument when she claimed that their experiences had to be understood as multiply shaped by

race and gender. Black feminists on both sides of the Atlantic and Third World feminist scholars had already produced numerous critiques of how the experiences of women of colour had been neglected in feminist discourse and had already underscored the importance of theorizing multiple identities and sources of oppression.[11] As early as 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a Black US feminist lesbian group, issued a stirring and highly influential manifesto in which they argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality should be integral to any feminist analysis of power and domination. Several years later, the first anthology of Black feminist thought appeared with a title that provocatively stated what was at stake with intersectionality: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull et al., 1982). Throughout the 1980s, the category 'woman' was in the process of being deconstructed (Riley, 1988; Spelman, 1988) and 'gender', once the undisputed lynchpin of feminist thought, was being dismantled as the theoretical basis for thinking about a common identity or shared experience of subordination among women. Race/class/gender became the new mantra within women's studies and it became *bon ton* to speak in the plural – of genders instead of gender, feminisms instead of feminism (Zack, 2007). If all these ideas were already 'in the air', then, what was so special about intersectionality?

Although intersectionality addressed an old problem within feminist scholarship, it did so with a new twist. It offered a novel link between critical feminist theory on the effects of sexism, class, and racism and a critical methodology inspired by postmodern feminist theory, bringing them together in ways that could not have been envisioned before. While feminist theories of race, class and gender and poststructuralist feminist theory shared many of the same concerns, there were also some theoretical and methodological incompatibilities. To begin with, the theorists had slightly different motivations. Postmodern feminist theorists were inspired by the postmodern project of deconstructing modernist philosophical traditions, while the race, class, and gender theorists were motivated by contemporary feminist politics. For many poststructuralist feminists, the essentialism of gender was the main problem. Their concern was less with how gender is shaped by other categories of difference in the social and material realities of women's lives than with finding ways to abandon categorical thinking altogether (McCall, 2005).[12] They were highly critical of many of the concepts adopted by theorists of race/class/gender – for example, experience, standpoint thinking, and identity politics.[13] Theorists of race, class and gender, in contrast, criticized poststructuralist feminist theory for paying insufficient attention to the material consequences of these categories of difference in the experiences of women of colour. They were wary of the political relativism which pervaded poststructuralist thinking. While they also recognized the connection between categorization and the exercise of power, they were not as inclined to reject the use of categories of difference out of hand, noting instead the importance of identity politics in specific historical contexts where it has been a critical, and even more effective, strategy of resistance than the

deconstruction of categories for combatting the effects of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991).[14]

Intersectionality provides an unanticipated way of overcoming these incompatibilities between feminist theory on race, class, and gender and postmodern feminist theory. It takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the post-structuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 82).[15] It offers the race/class/gender feminists a theoretically sophisticated methodology that can help them avoid some of the pitfalls of additive approaches to multiple identities. It gives post-structuralist feminist theory political credibility, enabling it to counter some of the criticisms of multicultural feminism that it has become distanced from the material realities of women's lives and too relativistic to be of use for women's concrete political struggles. In short, intersectionality provides the basis for a mutually beneficial collaboration between theoretical projects which had previously found themselves on somewhat uneasy footing. Thus, while the idea of intersectionality may not have been new, it provided a new platform – 'a joint nodal point' – for disparate theoretical approaches within feminist scholarship (Lykke, 2005).

Generalists and specialists

The third characteristic of successful social theories is that they must appeal to a broad academic audience, bridging the gap between theory generalists and specialists. They must 'contain enough seemingly easily grasped famous concepts to attract generalists, and enough difficult (but not impossible) to grasp complexity within and between these concepts to attract the specialists' (Davis, 1986: 295). Generalists are likely to have, at best, a very general impression of the theory. Their knowledge of the theory rarely extends beyond what they need to know in order to incorporate it in their teaching or to cite it in passing in their research. They have not necessarily read the theorist's original work, let alone her or his entire *oeuvre*, and are unlikely to be familiar with the intricacies of the theoretical debates. For generalists, the theory is often experienced as a few 'famous concepts' or easily remembered 'clichés' (Davis, 1986: 294). In contrast, theory specialists devote their entire career toward understanding a particular theory. They have usually read everything the theorist has ever written (often in the original language), and are highly knowledgeable about the concepts, their complex relations, and the specific problems associated with these concepts and relations. They make it their business to understand the subtleties of a theory, identifying its defects and shortcomings, and suggesting ways to elaborate it.

Bridging the division between specialists and generalists is by no means an easy undertaking, however, and part of a theory's success will be finding ways to accomplish this. Given that successful theories need to be regarded as novel, they will have to take on previous theories in such a novel way

that theory specialists will feel compelled to engage with the new theory. On the other hand, if the theory is too complex, it may simply leave the generalists mystified or befuddled. In order to capture their attention, the theory will need to offer a concept or concepts which are surprising enough to grab their attention and convince them that this is a new take on something they thought they already knew.[16]

Intersectionality has proved particularly adept in appealing to both generalists and specialists in feminist academic audiences. On the one hand, it has all the makings of a buzzword, which can easily capture the interest of the generalists. It appears frequently in the titles of articles in feminist journals on any number of subjects,[17] providing a catchy and convenient way of expressing the author's normative commitments. It allows her to express her familiarity with the latest developments in feminist theory, without necessarily exploring all the ramifications of the theoretical debates. The image of a crossroads which is associated with intersectionality seems applicable to nearly any context, providing a useful way for visualizing how differences intersect within a particular person's identity or in a specific social practice or location. Clichés like 'asking the other question' not only are easily remembered, but promise a handy way of doing research. It is no wonder that intersectionality has been taken up by many generalists as a welcome helpmeet for engaging in feminist inquiry.

On the other hand, intersectionality has many attractions for the theory specialists among feminist academics. Since its introduction as a theoretical concept, it has been the subject of numerous theoretical debates on both sides of the Atlantic. Theorists have found plenty to lock horns about. For example, heated debates have emerged about which categories (and how many) should be included in intersectional analysis (Lutz, 2002)[18] or whether the seemingly endless proliferation of difference might not, after all, be the 'Achilles heel of intersectionality' (Ludwig, 2006: 247), leaving the 'most salient' differences (race, class, and gender) undertheorized (Knapp, 1999; Skeggs, 1997).[19] Still other theorists have debated at length the problem of using categories at all, suggesting that what is needed is a more transversal approach – a thinking *across* categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006) or focusing on 'sites' where multiple identities are performed rather than on the categories themselves (Staunæs, 2003).[20] Discussions have emerged about the scope of intersectional analysis as well. Should it be primarily concerned with theorizing identity (Staunæs, 2003; Buitelaar, 2006; Prins, 2006) or is the problem that it has been too focused on identity to the detriment of social structures (Yuval-Davis, 2006)? Or should we be using intersectionality as a kind of 'grand theory', useful for understanding connections between individuals' lived experiences, socially structured institutional arrangements, and collective political mobilizations (Crenshaw, 1991)? And, finally, theorists have argued about the uses to which intersectional theory should be put. Should it be deployed primarily for uncovering vulnerabilities or exclusions or should we be examining it as a resource, a source of empowerment (Saharso, 2002; Burman, 2003; Lutz and Davis, 2005)? In short, as Ann Phoenix (2006) has aptly noted,

there seems to be enough in the concept of intersectionality to attract and repel feminist theorists to keep them going for a long time to come (p. 187).

Intersectionality is successful not only because it is both catchy and complex enough to stimulate theoretical debate but because it provides a much needed bridge between feminist researchers (generalists) and feminist theoreticians. In a well-known (and hotly debated) article for *Feminist Theory*, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (2000) criticized recent developments in feminist theory, arguing that theory has become 'the distinct activity and special preserve of a priestly caste determinedly maintaining an elite position' (p. 276). In their view, feminist theory has become limited to the esoteric theoretical ruminations of a handful of 'theory stars' rather than an activity in which all feminist researchers are engaged. They make a passionate plea for a return to the conception of theory as the 'commonly owned and shared production of feminist ideas' (p. 276). This is precisely what intersectionality seems to do. It mends the division between the generalists (feminist researchers) and specialists ('theory'), compelling the specialists to ground their meta-concerns in the concrete social and political contexts of women's lives and the generalists to reclaim theory as an integral part of feminist inquiry.

Ambiguity and incompleteness

The fourth characteristic of successful theory is that it is, paradoxically, inherently ambiguous and obviously incomplete. Davis (1986) takes issue with one of the shibboleths within the sociology of science that disputes about theoretical articulations mark the end of a theoretical paradigm. Unlike his forerunner Thomas Kuhn (1962), who viewed disagreements about inconsistencies and contradictions within a theory as the beginning of the 'break-down phase', Davis regards inconsistencies and missing pieces as part of what makes a theory famous in the first place. Theories thrive on ambiguity and incompleteness. A theory's decline has much more to do with changes in the minds of the audience – changes which cause it to become irrelevant to current preoccupations and concerns (Davis, 1986). Given the myriad and often hostile divisions in any academic audience, a successful theory has to be fuzzy and indeterminate enough that disparate groups will be able to interpret it in 'congenial, if mutually incompatible, ways' (p. 296). The more incoherent a theory is, the more it will require synthesis and elaboration. Pointing out the incongruities in a theory is the first step toward looking for ways to improve upon the original – an activity which is the bread and butter of theorizing. If ambiguity stimulates synthesis, then incompleteness can motivate an academic audience to elaborate or 'test' the theory by applying it to new areas of social life that were not addressed in the original theory (p. 297). According to Davis (1986), academics are generally less interested in 'filling in the blanks inside an already defined set of topics' than in 'extending their theory into new territory' – a difference between being the 'support troops who "mop up" behind battle lines' and the 'forward troops of a conquering army' (p. 297).

Although some feminists may object to such militaristic metaphors, Davis's contention that what makes academic inquiry exciting is not reiterating the familiar but exploring new ground is well taken. His argument that precisely the 'essential equivocality' and 'open-endedness' of a theory are what enhance its attractions is convincing. These are the qualities that allow a theory to weather the storms of competing interpretations and prevent the authoritarian privileging of one interpretation over another.[21] In short, successful theories are successful precisely because they do not settle matters once and for all; they open them up for further discussion and inquiry.

As a concept, intersectionality is, without a doubt, ambiguous and open-ended. As we have seen, feminist theorists have engaged in countless debates concerning how the concept should be defined, its appropriate parameters, and how it should be used. In attempting to make sense of the welter of competing interpretations and perspectives concerning intersectionality, Ann Phoenix (2006) concludes that 'no concept is perfect and none can ever accomplish the understanding and explanation of all that needs to be understood and explained within the field of women's studies' (p. 191). While this suggests that intersectionality's conceptual imperfections are simply unavoidable problems to be taken in one's stride, Davis's analysis offers another – and perhaps more optimistic – reading. It is precisely because intersectionality is so imperfect – ambiguous and open-ended – that it has been so productive for contemporary feminist scholarship. Its lack of clear-cut definition or even specific parameters has enabled it to be drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry. The infinite regress built into the concept – which categories to use and when to stop – makes it vague, yet also allows endless constellations of intersecting lines of difference to be explored. With each new intersection, new connections emerge and previously hidden exclusions come to light. The feminist scholar merely needs to 'ask (an)other question' and her research will take on a new and often surprising turn. She can begin to tease out the linkages between additional categories, explore the consequences for relations of power, and, of course, decide when another 'question' is needed or when it is time to stop and why. Intersectionality offers endless opportunities for interrogating one's own blind spots and transforming them into analytic resources for further critical analysis. In short, intersectionality, by virtue of its vagueness and inherent open-endedness, initiates a process of discovery which not only is potentially interminable, but promises to yield new and more comprehensive and reflexively critical insights. What more could one desire from feminist inquiry?

Assessing intersectionality's success

In this article, I have raised the question of how the vague and open-ended concept of intersectionality could become such a success within contemporary feminist theory. I have shown that the success of intersectionality can be explained by the paradox that its so-called weaknesses are what have allowed it to become so successful in the first place. What most

irritates and confuses feminist scholars when they attempt to use intersectionality in their own inquiries is, at the same time, what attracts and seduces them into wanting to engage with it. More importantly, the concept's very lack of precision and its myriad missing pieces are what have made it such a useful heuristic device for critical feminist theory.

Obviously, successful theories are not necessarily 'good' theories – and, indeed, as Davis has shown, the most successful theories are often not the best ones in the sense of being coherent or capable of providing encompassing or irrefutable explanations of social life. Some feminist scholars – much in line with this sociological common sense concerning 'good theory' – have argued that the concept of intersectionality would be greatly improved with a more clear-cut and universally applicable definition (Verloo, 2006).[22] Others have expressed concern that feminist theorists have embraced a concept with such enthusiasm, given its lack of clarity concerning the scope and parameters of the theory. In order to be a 'good theory', it is argued, intersectionality would require more sustained attention to the specific and fundamentally different logics of social divisions and inequalities as well as the different dynamics and outcomes of their intersections (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Still others have suggested that intersectionality would be a better theory if it were accompanied by more stringent methodological guidelines concerning where, how, and to what end it could – or should – be used in feminist inquiry (McCall, 2005). These worries resonate with the uncertainties experienced by many feminist scholars who would like to use intersectionality in their own research, but are not quite sure where to begin, or with those who, having adopted the concept, find themselves faced with the problem of what to do *after* 'asking the other question'. These concerns share a conviction that, while intersectionality is clearly important, the ambiguity and open-endedness of the concept stand in the way of its usefulness for feminist theory. In order to achieve its full potential, intersectionality is in need of a definition, a set of clearly demarcated parameters, and a methodology which would eliminate any confusion among researchers concerning how, where, and when it should be applied.

Of course, the notion of 'good theory' is itself highly contested. It might be argued that feminist theory is – or should be – less concerned with considerations of clarity and comprehensiveness than with how a theory can be deployed for specific normative or political purposes. As Judith Butler and Joan Scott (1992) note, feminist theory needs to 'generate analyses, critiques, and political interventions, and open up a political imaginary for feminism that points the way beyond some of the impasses by which it has been constrained' (p. xiii). In their view, a 'good' feminist theory would not end the confusion once and for all, but would allow us to attend to and critically analyse the multiplicity of divisions and inequalities. It would open up space for critique and intervention, while enabling us to be reflexive about the range and limitations of our own theoretical enterprise.

While intersectionality may not fit the sociological common sense concerning 'good theory' as coherent, comprehensive, and sound, it does

provide an instance of *good* feminist theory in the sense that Butler and Scott describe. Intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated. It compels us to grapple with this complexity in our scholarship. It does not provide written-in-stone guidelines for doing feminist inquiry, a kind of feminist methodology to fit all kinds of feminist research. Rather, it stimulates our creativity in looking for new and often unorthodox ways of doing feminist analysis. Intersectionality does not produce a normative straitjacket for monitoring feminist inquiry in search of the 'correct line'. Instead it encourages each feminist scholar to engage critically with her own assumptions in the interests of reflexive, critical, and accountable feminist inquiry.

In this sense, intersectionality has precisely the ingredients which are required of a good feminist theory. It encourages complexity, stimulates creativity, and avoids premature closure, tantalizing feminist scholars to raise new questions and explore uncharted territory. Of course, at some point, we may discover that intersectionality is not addressing the issues which seem most important to us. Or it may not be addressing them in a sufficiently novel and unexpected way. We may discover that theoretical debates about intersectionality have become too detailed and convoluted for our liking or that the research has become so predictable that we cannot suppress a yawn at the thought of having to read even one more article on intersectionality. When that day comes, I would hope that a new theory enters the scene – a theory which speaks to an even more fundamental concern in a delightfully novel but irritatingly ambiguous way, thereby irresistibly compelling us, specialists and generalists alike, to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Notes

I would like to thank Anna Aalten, Willem de Haan, Lena Inowlocki, and Helma Lutz as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and thought-provoking comments.

1. Crenshaw (1991) later developed the concept to include structural, political and representational levels, applying it broadly to violence against women of colour. She showed how women of colour face structural obstacles making them particularly vulnerable to battery and rape and that both feminism and anti-racism have failed to address the ways that race and gender intersect to produce this vulnerability. Feminists have been primarily concerned with getting the issue of domestic violence on the political agenda as a 'women's issue', and have tended to downplay differences among women. Anti-racists have been primarily concerned with the historical stereotyping of Black men as the rapists of white women, thereby neglecting intra-race violence against women of colour. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of colour, women of colour are marginalized in both discourses, making an intersectional approach essential in order to address and redress their experiences with violence. See, also, Crenshaw (1992).
2. For a seminal formulation, see, Merton (1973).

3. Since I always get this question, I should note that Murray Davis and I are not related, although we have the same last name.
4. Even – as Knapp (2005) has argued – one of feminism's most well-known 'travelling theories'.
5. For the record, I do not subscribe to the notion that a theory needs to meet certain scientific criteria in order to be useful. However, as any student in the social sciences will know, considerable attention has been given to what is required for a 'good' theory. Thus, by 'soundness' I am referring to the scientific conventions for good theory.
6. For sociology, the fundamental concern was the relationship between individual and society – a concern which was recycled in endless debates about social order and social role, structure and agency, and cultural discourses and processes of subjectification. That concern kept sociological debates flourishing well into the 21st century, when it was ousted by a new 'fundamental concern', namely, globalization.
7. I say 'deceptively' because, as anyone knows who has tried to employ this procedure, it merely marks the beginning of the analysis. The hard work of making sense of the connections between categories of difference and interpreting them in terms of power has yet to be done. I will be returning to this point later on in this article.
8. I am reminded of a conversation I had several years ago with colleagues about the name of our department (still called 'women's studies'). After entertaining a switch to 'gender studies', one of us suggested: 'How about Diversity Studies?' While most of us agreed that this was more in line with what we were actually doing, there was a palpable unease in the room, a sense of loss, and a worry that we might be talking ourselves out of existence. For a discussion of this anxiety about difference, the reader is referred to Felski (1997) and other contributors to the special issue 'The Doxa of Difference' in *Signs*.
9. Or, as Pfeil (1994) notes, a 'disabling fetish' which ignores the effort of differently located feminists to discover affinities and possibilities for alliance 'on the ground'.
10. Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004) begin their history of intersectionality with a quote from a speech given more than a century ago by the ex-slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth at a convention on women's rights, held in Akron, Ohio in 1851. Speaking before a predominantly white audience of abolitionists, many of whom were women, she is reputed to have said: 'That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. *And ain't I a woman?*' (cited in Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 77). 'Ain't I a woman?' expresses the intersectionality of identity in a nutshell and to this day remains a provocative statement of why there are no universal definitions of gender and why the experiences of poor women and women of colour always need to be situated within multiple sources of oppression.
11. It is impossible to do justice to this writing, but here are some of the most well-known and frequently cited works: Davis (1981), hooks (1981), Carby (1982), Smith (1983), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983), Ware (1992), Zinn and Dill (1994), Collins (1990).

12. A case in point is Judith Butler's (1989) well-known critique of the 'embarrassed "etc."' which ends the list of predicates (gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness) that 'strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete' (p. 143).
13. See, for example, Scott (1992), Hekman et al. (1997), Henwood et al. (1998), Trinh (1989), Butler (1989), Brown (2001), Nicholson and Seidman (1995), Brah (1996), Moi (2000).
14. Similar arguments were made by hooks (1992, 1994), Spivak (1993), Moya (2001) and Mohanty (2003).
15. It is not surprising that many of the debates about intersectionality have concerned precisely the problem of categories and the necessity to rely upon them in intersectional analysis. See, for example, Yuval-Davis's (2006) critique of the 'crossroad' metaphor which implies that once a road is taken, all other roads become irrelevant, at least for the time being. Knapp (2005) has also expressed concern about the lack of attention in intersectional theory to the specific ontologies and histories of categories of social inequality.
16. One look at contemporary feminist theory will attest that the successful theories have, indeed, appealed to both groups. Take, for example, Judith Butler's classic critique of gender (Butler, 1989, 1993). Her wildly popular book *Gender Trouble* not only generated a wave of specialists interested in explaining what she 'really' meant and taking a stand for or against her theory, but it provided enough easily remembered concepts and clichés (gender as performance, gender trouble, material bodies) to spark the interest of a broad audience of generalists in the field of women's studies. Indeed, her work is probably the most well-cited piece of feminist scholarship, standing in for a novel approach to gender. Other examples of similarly successful feminist theories are Donna Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1980), Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice* (1982). For an analysis of the success of that particular theory, the reader is referred to K. Davis (1992).
17. An Internet search yielded 2450 hits under 'intersectionality' and encompassed fields ranging from law, international relations, human rights, psychotherapy, identity politics, literature, popular culture, and many more.
18. Helma Lutz (2002) has provided a list of no less than fourteen lines of difference (gender, sexuality, race or skin colour, ethnicity, national belonging, class, culture, religion, able-bodiedness, age, sedentariness, property ownership, geographical location, and status in terms of tradition and development). The list is, however, potentially much longer. See, also, Lutz and Wenning (2001).
19. Leiprecht and Lutz (2006) offer an interesting compromise, whereby race, class, and gender are taken as a 'minimum standard' for intersectional analysis to which other categories can be added, depending upon the context and the specifics of the research problem.
20. As McCall (2005: 1779) points out, much of the literature on intersectionality has been critical of broad and sweeping generalizations of categorization rather than critical of categorization per se. Crenshaw (1991) deliberately takes issue with what she calls 'vulgar constructionist'

attempts to dismantle categories altogether in the name of anti-essentialism. Given the significance of categories like race and gender for the experiences and struggles of women of colour, it makes more sense to challenge the social and material consequences of categories rather than just the process of categorization per se. Identity politics do not need to be abandoned because of their reliance on categories but rather need to recognize the multiplicity of identities and the ways categories intersect at specific sites (Crenshaw, 1991: 1297–9).

21. This includes the theorist's own definition of her or his concepts. Interestingly, Crenshaw has been implicitly accused of not being 'intersectional' enough (Yuval-Davis, 2006).
22. Verloo (2006) would like to see intersectionality used to screen gender research and social policy, analogous to the use of 'gender' in 'gender mainstreaming'. As many critics of gender mainstreaming have already noted, one of the problems has been the erasure of the complexities of the debates about gender in favour of a clear-cut definition that is suitable for policy.

References

Anthias, F. (1998) 'Rethinking Social Divisions: Some Notes Towards a Theoretical Framework', *Sociological Review* 46(3): 557–80.

Anthias, F. and N. Yuval-Davis (1983) 'Contextualizing Feminism: Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions', *Feminist Review* 15: 62–75.

Brah, A. (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.

Brah, A. and A. Phoenix (2004) 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5(3): 75–86.

Brown, W. (2001) *Politics out of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Buitelaar, M. (2006) '"I Am the Ultimate Challenge": Accounts of Intersectionality in the Life-Story of a Well-Known Daughter of Moroccan Migrant Workers in the Netherlands', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 259–76.

Burman, E. (2003) 'From Difference to Intersectionality: Challenges and Resources', *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health* 6(4): 293–308.

Butler, J. (1989) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. and J. W. Scott (1992) 'Introduction', pp. xiii–xvii in J. Butler and J. W. Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York: Routledge.

Carby, H. (1982) 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', pp. 212–35 in The Centre for Contemporary Studies (ed.) *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Realism in 70s Britain*. London: Hutchinson.

Chodorow, N. (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Collins, P. H. (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Power and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Collins, P. H. (2000) 'It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation', pp. 156–76 in U. Narayan and S. Harding (eds) *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 14: 538–54.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–99.

Crenshaw, K. (1992) 'Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill', pp. 402–40 in T. Morrison (ed.) *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Davis, A. Y. (1981) *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House.

Davis, K. (1992) 'Toward a Feminist Rhetoric: The Gilligan-Debate Revisited', *Women's Studies International Forum* 15(2): 219–31.

Davis, M. S. (1971) 'That's Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1: 309–44.

Davis, M. S. (1986) '"That's Classic!" The Phenomenology and Rhetoric of Successful Social Theories', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 16: 285–301.

Felski, R. (1997) 'The Doxa of Difference', *Signs* 23(1): 1–69.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haraway, D. J. (1980) 'Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's', *Socialist Review* 80: 65–108.

Haraway, D. J. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–99.

Hekman, S., N. Hartsock, P. H. Collins, S. Harding and D. Smith (1997) 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited', *Signs* 22(2): 341–402.

Henwood, K., C. Griffin and A. Phoenix, eds (1998) *Standpoints and Differences*. London: SAGE.

hooks, b. (1981) *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1992) *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1994) *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge.

Hull, G. T., P. B. Scott and B. Smith, eds (1982) *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury: Feminist Press.

King, D. (1988) 'Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology', *Signs* 14(1): 42–72.

Knapp, G.-A. (1999) 'Fragile Foundations, Strong Traditions, Situated Questioning: Critical Theory in German-Speaking Feminism', pp. 119–41 in M. O'Neill (ed.) *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*. London: SAGE.

Knapp, G.-A. (2005) 'Race, Class, Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12(3): 249–66.

Knudsen, S. V. (2006) 'Intersectionality – A Theoretical Inspiration in the

Analysis of Minority Cultures and Identities in Textbooks', pp. 61–76 in E. Bruillard, B. Aamotsbakken, S. V. Knudsen and M. Horsley (eds) *Caught in the Web or Lost in the Textbook?* Caen: IARTEM, Stef, Iufm.

Kuhn, T. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Leiprecht, R. and H. Lutz (2006) 'Intersektionalität im Klassenzimmer: Ethnizität, Klasse, Geschlecht', pp. 218–34 in R. Leiprecht and A. Kerber (eds) *Schule in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*. Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag.

Ludwig, A. (2006) 'Differences Between Women? Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 245–58.

Lugones, M. and E. V. Spelman (1983) 'Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for "The Woman's Voice"', *Women's Studies International Forum* 6(6): 573–81.

Lutz, H. (2002) 'Zonder blikken of blozen. Het standpunt van de (nieuw-) realisten', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 5(3): 7–17.

Lutz, H. and K. Davis (2005) 'Geschlechterforschung und Biografieforschung: Intersektionalität als biographische Ressource am Beispiel einer außergewöhnlichen Frau', pp. 228–47 in B. Völter, B. Dausien, H. Lutz and G. Rosenthal (eds) *Biographieforschung im Diskurs*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Lutz, H. and N. Wenning (2001) 'Differenzen über Differenz – Einführung in die Debatten', pp. 11–24 in H. Lutz and N. Wenning (eds) *Unterschiedlich Verschieden. Differenz in der Erziehungswissenschaf*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.

Lykke, N. (2005) 'Intersectionality Revisited: Problems and Potentials', *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 2(3): 7–17.

McCall, L. (2005) 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs* 30(3): 1771–800.

Mani, L. (1989) 'Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception', *Inscriptions* 5: 1–24.

Matsuda, M. J. (1991) 'Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition', *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1183–92.

Merton, R. K. (1973) *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mohanty, C. T. (1988) 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review* 30: 61–88.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003) *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Moi, T. (2000) *Sex, Gender, and the Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moraga, C. and G. Anzaldúa, eds (1983) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Press.

Moya, P. M. L. (2001) 'Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory', *Signs* 26(2): 441–83.

Nicholson, L. and S. Seidman, eds (1995) *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pfeil, F. (1994) 'No Basta Teorizar: In-Difference to Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction, Theory, and Practice', pp. 197–230 in I. Grewal and C. Kaplan (eds) *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Phoenix, A. (2006) 'Editorial: Intersectionality', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 187–92.
Prins, B. (2006) 'Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 277–90.
Riley, D. (1988) *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Saharso, S. (2002) 'Een vrouw met twee missies. Reactie op Helma Lutz', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 5(3): 18–23.
Scott, J. W. (1992) 'Experience', pp. 22–40 in J. Butler and J. W. Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York: Routledge.
Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: SAGE.
Smith, B., ed. (1983) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press.
Spelman, E. (1988) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Spivak, G. C. (1993) *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London: Routledge.
Stanley, L. and S. Wise (2000) 'But the Empress has no Clothes! Some Awkward Questions about the "Missing Revolution" in Feminist Theory', *Feminist Theory* 1(3): 261–88.
Staunæs, D. (2003) 'Where Have all the Subjects Gone? Bringing together the Concepts of Intersectionality and Subjectification', *Nora* 11(2): 101–10.
Trinh, M. T. (1989) *Woman/Native/Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Verloo, M. (2006) 'Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality and the European Union', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 211–28.
Ware, V. (1992) *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*. London: Verso.
Yuval-Davis, N. (1997) *Gender and Nation*. London: SAGE.
Yuval-Davis, N. (2006) 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 193–210.
Zack, N. (2007) 'Can Third Wave Feminism Be Inclusive? Intersectionality, its Problems, and New Directions', pp. 193–207 in L. M. Alcoff and E. F. Kittay (eds) *Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
Zinn, M. B. and B. T. Dill, eds (1994) *Women of Color in US Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Kathy Davis is senior researcher at the Institute of History and Culture at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Her books include *Power Under the Microscope* (Foris, 1988), *Reshaping the Female Body* (Routledge, 1995), *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders* (Duke University Press, 2007). She has edited several anthologies, including *The Gender of Power* (SAGE, 1991), *Negotiating at the Margins* (Rutgers University Press, 1992), *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (SAGE, 1997), and *The Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies* (SAGE, 2006) (with Mary Evans and Judith Lorber).

Address: Research Institute History and Culture, Utrecht University, Muntstr. 2A, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands. Email: kathy.davis@let.uu.nl