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A Critical Cartography of the Mattering(s) of Identity Politics: Intersectional and Interferential Explorations

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Abstract

Currently the subject of polarising debates and political instrumentalisation, identity politics – together with how it is entangled with identity as a lived but also theorisable experience consisting of discursive, material, and affective dimensions – is rightfully regarded as a complex phenomenon. This chapter unpacks some of this complexity by mapping out the matters – and matterings of – identity (politics) by means of a critical cartographical methodology (see Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2005; Braidotti [1994] 2011). After sketching out several critical materialist philosophical conceptualisations of identity (politics), such as those rooted in feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledges, intersectional activism and scholarship, queer theory, and queer of colour critique, a critical new materialist framework that continues along these matter(ings)-emphasising lines is presented. This critical new materialist framework, or put differently, an interferential framework (cf. Haraway 1997; Barad 2007; Geerts and van der Tuin 2013, 2021), conceptualises identity as an always-shifting myriad of the discursive-material-affective (cf. Puar 2012; Lykke 2020; Tiainen et al. 2020). This interference-based framework not only allows for a more conceptually clear and multifocal theorisation of all things identity, consequently highlighting a coalitional identities-based politics, but it also demonstrates that contemporary critical new materialist thought builds on preceding feminist materialist paradigms.

Introduction: The complex mattering(s) of identity and identity politics

Identity, identity categories and labels, and identity politics are all around us: they are currently the subject of polarising debates between the global Left and Right; are making up the institutionalised oppressive structures of sexism, racism, and homophobia; and even manifest themselves as the affect-laden flows and after-effects of microaggressions or stereotyping slights sprouting from prejudice and biases.[1] Whether discursive, material, affective, or a combination of these three dimensions, pre-set identity categories (often seen

as disempowering) and reclaimed identity labels (mainly considered empowering) materialise in complex ways.[2] The complexity of the mattering(s) of identity forms an extra challenge to those wishing to philosophically grasp matters of identity and the often heavily politicised debates fuelled by identity matters.[3]

Wishing to untangle the complexity just presented through a contemporary philosophical lens, this chapter sketches out several materialist philosophical conceptualisations of identity via Deleuzoguattarian philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s ([1994] 2011) methodology of critical cartography. These cartographical sketches provide the foundation for a critical materialist conceptualisation of identity (politics). The critical materialist, and more specifically, critical new materialist[4], framework presented here positions identity as an always-shifting myriad of the discursive-material-affective (cf. Puar 2012; Lykke 2020; Tiainen et al. 2020), able to capture the above-mentioned crisscrossing layers of identity without essentialising identity categories or labels. Because of this, a critical new materialist, or phrased differently, an interferential (cf. Haraway 1997; Barad 2007; Geerts and van der Tuin 2013, 2021), perspective plays a crucial role in translating identity’s complex nature into philosophical concepts. The critical new materialist framework that is explored in what follows, then, is developed in conversation with the critical materialist paradigms of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) and intersectionality (the Combahee River Collective [1977] 1982; Crenshaw 1989, 1991), furthermore demonstrating that the ‘newness’ of critical new materialisms actually amounts to a reworking of past materialisms.

Before developing such a critical (new) materialist framework, however, its critical cartographical contours and context need to be unpacked: this chapter works with Braidottian critical mapmaking as a methodology, as it is rooted in philosopher Michel Foucault’s politico-epistemological idea of power/knowledge ([1976] 1990), feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway’s situated knowledges (1988), and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ([1980] 2005) critique of tracing. These philosophical influences indicate that critical cartography places a situated type of power analytics-focused thinking at the centre, or as Braidotti ([1994] 2011, 4) describes it, critical cartography boils down to ‘a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present’. Such a situated methodology is essential, as this chapter’s cartographer is located at the intersections of her own lived identities that have been given meaning within a geopolitically charged context, adding a layer of non-innocence – the effect of ‘knowing in being’ (Barad 2007, 185) or theorising from within and with the world – to this project. Critical cartography moreover allows me to tap into my own transnational living archive as a white queer Belgian from a working-class background who taught at a large American public research university during 2014–2017, all while making sure that extra attention is paid to the political praxis of citation (see

Mott and Cockayne 2017). Such an affirmative citational praxis matters, because critical cartographies are meant to be non-totalising in nature, opposing what Haraway (1988, 581) calls monofocal 'god trick[s]'. The situated map drawn here could therefore be recycled or even redrawn by other cartographers – as it should, as identity, besides being a complex multi-layered phenomenon, is foundational to our individual and collective lived experiences.

Identity matters: Lived, politicised, and instrumentalised

The lived nature of identity is not the only thing at stake here, however: philosophically pinning down mattering(s) of identity tends to provoke lengthy discussions about identity politics. This has led to the often extreme politicisation and instrumentalisation of identity matters. Looking at the more popular philosophical discussions held in the United States (see Lilla 2017; Fukuyama 2018) over the last couple of years, identity as an embodied experience has been hollowed out and transformed into a political object. This politicisation process creates the impression that identity politics is only exercised by minoritised subjects and therefore does not matter that much. This backlash explains why paying attention to identity and identity-related claims in the US usually gets painted as progressive liberalism's self-destruction (political scientist Mark Lilla's position) or as divisive because of the association of identity politics with a radical recognition-demanding model of minority subjectivities (political theorist Francis Fukuyama's take). A similar dynamic can be found in Continental Europe, where gender 'ideology' critics – think of France's *La Manif pour Tous* (Protest for All) and the Flemish identitarian youth movement *Schild & Vrienden* (Shield & Friends) – fuelled by conservative religious groups, extreme right nationalism, and rigid ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality, are mobilising against 'woke' – or too 'social justice warrior-ish' – identity politics and minority rights by means of…an identity politics of their own (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).[5]

The materiality and socio-political embeddedness of identity – or the ways in which identity is connected to a subject's embodied experiencing of reality, including the labels and socio-cultural artefacts used to express that identity – makes things even more complex. Many of the grassroots movements making use of identity claims, as sociologist Suzanna D. Walters (2018) noted in a piece on the 2016 American elections, contest 'both white male hegemony and the relentless process of marking and unmarking that has allowed identity to be only located in those who have been actively denied citizenship and subjectivity' (476–477). This critical epistemological note should strike a chord with the reader: the praxis of what is called identity politics has typically been carried out by dehumanised minority subjects fighting for their (and other marginalised subjects') rights to be treated as citizen-subjects – a recognitional process that is not half as problematic as Fukuyama claims it to be.[6] This reactionary backlash against identity and identity politics in current neoliberal times is

nonetheless not that surprising, as the public debate typically is dominated by those in the luxurious position of navigating the world as 'universal', 'body-less', and automatically recognised subjects.[7] The ethico-political and, in fact, critical new materialist, question of which embodied identity-'branded' subjects had to invest in emancipatory political praxes – now reduced to radical 'woke' identity politics by the global Right – to, often quite literally, stay alive, cannot be ignored when addressing mattering(s) of identity.

Now, it is the combination of the lived complexity and the current-day political instrumentalisation of identity that makes things especially tricky, as is demonstrated by the three vignettes below belonging to my own lived archive and philosophical attempts to define identity. Unfortunately, even the most commonsensical understanding of identity already give rise to convoluted debates. To provide an example: categories and labels are used daily to make sense of the world, ourselves, and others, and identity is part of this orientational process. This type of sense-making is not immune to power relations: the categories that people use to structure the world around them, tell us a lot about their socio-political environments. The same goes for identity categories, or as feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff (2000, 6) has put it: 'Identities are markers for history, social location, and positionality'. This becomes clear when looking at the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s "Identity" (2020, n. p.) entry: 'Identity' there is defined as a certain shared essence, relating to 'personal identity' (i.e., '[w]ho or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others'). Following the second definition – as 'personal identity' instantaneously brings up questions of subjectivation, intersubjective relations, and 'identity politics' ("Identity politics" 2020, n. p.)[8] – identity seems to be constructed around societally rooted identity-building anchor points, such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity[9], nationality, class, ablebodiedness, and many others. These crisscrossing categories and the group identities that are engendered through them make us feel like we belong somewhere. This is because of our embodied condition and situated positionality (Haraway 1988) and the categories and labels with which we get identified – but also choose for ourselves. This double dynamic of receiving-resisting categories and labels has been explained well by philosopher Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). Combining Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation with Foucauldian power/knowledge, Butler conceptualises the process of becoming-subject as influenced by socio-political structures and (counter-)actions. Seen through Butler's performativity perspective, subjects are continuously shaped by power's multidirectional forces, steered by discursive regimes, and have at least some agential capacity to (re)negotiate these forces and labels. One thus only becomes a subject through – for some very violent – processes of interpellation.

Identity thus haunts some more than others – and the three vignettes I discuss next show how the political instrumentalisation of identity matters has made

things even more complicated for those already marginalised. The first vignette throws us back into 2016, the election year in which former presidential candidate Hillary R. Clinton called Donald J. Trump’s supporters ‘deplorables’ because of their pro-nationalist mindset (see Chozick 2016). By labelling these voters as such, Clinton not only fuelled their pre-existing political ressentiment but partook in an identity politics debate spotlighting the American socio-cultural understanding of the intersections between race/ethnicity and class – and, of course, the idea of American whiteness as a supposedly unmarked category (see Haider 2018). Instead of realising that the American Dream was never designed with them in mind either, a lot of the American white working-class constituents at the time were seduced by a xenophobic Trumpian version of said ‘Dream’, rejecting solidarity with those experiencing other forms of institutionalised oppression. By attacking Clinton’s politicisation of identity through depoliticising or, rather, flat-out denying the existence of institutionalised racism, classism, and anti-Black police violence, Trump actually politicised everything even more. This perverse politicised depoliticisation – built on the instrumentalisation of identity politics and ‘wokeness’ caricatures – underlines the need for a more sensible discussion on the matter(s) of race/ethnicity and racism in the American socio-cultural landscape. In the end, Trump’s repoliticisation manoeuvres are but a cover-up for a dehumanising white supremacist definition of American identity as soil-based and colourism-rooted.

Two other vignettes, this time from the European continent, reveal a similar logic. In Belgium, Flemish nationalist N-VA (New Flemish Alliance) politician Liesbeth Homans created some controversy in 2013 when claiming that racism is but a ‘relative’ phenomenon (Homans in jta 2013, n. p., own translation), supposedly exploited by certain – read: Muslim and non-white – minorities. This way of thinking has repeatedly set the tone for said political party’s program regarding systematic discrimination and identity. More recently, fellow party member Theo Francken added fuel to the fire by attacking ‘men putting on makeup, getting their eyebrows epilated, dressing up in lingerie, wearing a handbag, or becoming pregnant’ in a Facebook post (Francken in Redactie 2018, n. p., own translation). Hinting at the idea that queering gender and sexuality norms stands in opposition to Flemish society’s values, creates an interesting contradiction when compared to the N-VA’s otherwise homonationalist (Puar 2007) appropriation of women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights: the latter apparently only must be defended when having to ‘save’ women and gays from the allegedly intolerant Muslim minority in Belgium, to paraphrase critical theorist Sarah Bracke (2012). This identity-focused debate – and third vignette – is propelled by the same polarising logic noticeable in the American example earlier: these two Belgian politicians are not just downplaying discrimination. They are also constructing a Flemish identity-based counter-narrative; a reactionary one even, now operating at the back of the educational

Flemish cultural canon project (see Sleiderink 2020). Talking about fighting identity politics with identity politics!

Using these vignettes as starting points for the critical (new) materialist cartography presented below, which focuses on the ethico-political layers of identity matterings, it becomes clear that these three political examples point at the instrumentalisation, repoliticisation, and fetishisation of identity. As these neoliberal pandemic times have become utterly individualism-driven and post-truth-oriented – causing us to lose whatever grip on our surroundings we thought we still had – people apparently must be put into neatly carved-out boxes to create some sense of existential certainty. Yet, these boxes do not honour identity's theoretical and lived complexity, that is, identity is about receiving-resisting labels and categories, and meaning structures of discrimination, oppression, and privilege are continuously at play as well. This clashes with neoliberalism's belief in an atomic, hyper-responsibilised subject disconnected from society; solely to blame for 'individual' failures. Moreover, the oppositional logic that is frequently employed when it comes to identity brings about (counter-)nationalist discourses that instrumentalise the identity category (or group) *du jour* for political goals, as seen in the two N-VA vignettes above. This, ironically enough, engenders a type of politics that is equally rooted in identity claims.

Materialist identity theories: Cartographical constellations

Having cleared up at least a bit of the complexity surrounding the lived and politically instrumentalised reality of identity matterings, it is time to delve deeper into our critical cartographical explorations. As noted earlier, and in line with Butler's poststructuralist queer philosophy, identity boils down to a receiving-resisting dynamic: we can speak of an ongoing feedback loop taking place between social differences, identity categories and labels, and interpellated subjects, while the differences, categories and labels, and subjects simultaneously depend on the power-laden environments from which they are emerging. This dynamic is thus very much contextual and requires a situated analysis.

Such an analysis will be provided now by focusing on critical theories that address the mattering(s) of identity in lived and critical epistemological ways, namely, feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledges, intersectional activism and scholarship, queer theory, and queer of colour critique – all primarily critical materialist philosophies inspiring critical new materialist thought. I then cartographically build on these theories to explore the idea of interference as a way of pushing the ethico-political question of identity mattering(s) even further.

Critical materialisms and identity

To better grasp the (non-)mattering(s) of identity, we need theories that zoom in on the entanglements between the (ethico-)political (power) and the epistemological (knowledge). This is exactly what feminist standpoint theory is about: forming the feminist, Marxist, and in some cases also antiracist subbranch of social epistemology, this strand of thought is defined as ‘arising out of feminist projects, which prompt[ed] reflection on the nature of knowledge and our methods for attaining it’ (Lennon and Whitford [1994] 2002, 13). Feminist standpoint theorists, such as Sandra Harding (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins ([1990] 2009), are drawn to knowledge production’s material conditions. These thinkers concentrate on how world-embedded structures and power relations impact the ways we are (taught to) think about the world, and moreover examine why certain subjects are automatically regarded as legitimate knowledge producers. By stressing the knowledge producer’s positionality and identity markers, feminist standpoint thinkers show that the cut between the epistemological and the (ethico-)political in traditional epistemology must be interrogated and contested. Who gets to produce ‘real’ knowledge and who is merely allowed to support the knowledge creator through manual, care, and emotional labour is partially built upon contextual identity-informed structures, such as sexism, racism, and classism. Haraway (1988, 1997, and 2016) occupies a special place amongst these theorists: although Haraway shares most of feminist standpoint theory’s Marxist materialist proclivities, her oeuvre is also characterised by poststructuralist and even posthumanist critiques of the latter. Haraway’s situated knowledges project in fact thinks together the material-discursive, instead of reducing the analysis of intersubjective relations to class, gender, and material labour conditions. A more-than-human world and multiperspectivist philosophy are spotlighted by Haraway – pushing her towards intersectional and critical new materialist thought.

The above outline provokes some anticipatory thoughts on intersectionality: rooted in Black feminist activism and academic work (the Combahee River Collective [1977] 1982; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hill Collins [1990] 2009; Wekker 2004), and partly overlapping with feminist standpoint theory, intersectionality presents us with a second conceptualisation of identity. Intersectional thinkers investigate who gets to speak, theorise, and be heard, but do so by taking the intersections of various identity markers – and the privilege and/or oppression contextually attached to these markers – into account. Thus, they move beyond the monofocal perspective of feminist standpoint thinkers that initially only concentrated on gender-seen-through-class. In this sense, intersectionality contains a critique of standard identity politics-based conceptualisations of identity, as identity here is no longer perceived as something singular and essentialist.

This non-essentialising move is also found in queer theory and queer of colour critique: Teresa de Lauretis (1984) and Butler, but also Cathy Cohen (1999) and

Fatima El-Tayeb (2011), are all about the queering of entangled identity categories and the representationalism attached to these categories. They spotlight yet another materialist conceptualisation of identity. But whereas the first set of thinkers is more preoccupied with disentangling the normative linkages between sex, gender identity, desire, and sexual orientation, Cohen and El-Tayeb push this multifocal analysis further. They do so by examining how race/ethnicity, class, and capital play a role in upholding a heteronormative system; a system in which subjects with intersecting non-normative identities are not recognised as mattering. Queer and queer of colour critique scholars focus on deconstructing identities and the structures in which these are anchored; an undertaking that clashes with the accentuation of identity and identity politics in many feminist standpoint and intersectional theories. This tension, interestingly enough, creates several overlaps between queer (of colour critique) philosophies and critical new materialisms: critical new materialist theory – whether rooted in Deleuzoguattarian theory (Braidotti [1994] 2011; Grosz 2017), feminist science studies (Haraway 1997; Barad 2007), or feminist takes on Foucauldian philosophy (Puar 2007, 2012)[10] – is equally critical of rigid identity conceptualisations, while questioning dominant systems of intelligibility and representationalism.

To anticipate on critical new materialisms' critique of representationalism that forges an alliance between this strand of thought and queer (of colour critique) theories, philosopher-physicist Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) criticises the assumption that the world only consists of representations and entities represented. Barad hereby unravels the 'tripartite arrangement' (2007, 46) that makes representationalism possible:

> [I]n addition to knowledge (i.e., representations), on the one hand, and the known (i.e., that which is purportedly represented) on the other, the existence of a knower (i.e., someone who does the representing) is sometimes made explicit. When this happens, it becomes clear that representations are presumed to serve a mediating function between independently existing entities. This taken-for-granted ontological gap generates questions of the accuracy of representations. (46–47)

Wanting to return to the matter of matter or materiality, Barad unpacks this gap between reality represented and its representations, which is said to be propped up by a Western modern individualist metaphysics, packed with dichotomised binaries, such as language/reality, subject/object, and human/non-human. Barad's agential realist move is materialist in nature and, if we would want to better understand, and eventually, deconstruct, the ruling system of intelligibility, the normative 'workings of power' (66), and the societal status

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quo that rest upon the foregoing elements, then we should study ‘the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality’ (66). This is where the bio-/necropolitical – or the neoliberalism-fuelled political decision over who gets to matter and live a liveable life – comes into play. This focus on (non-)mattering(s) brings many queer (of colour critique) and critical new materialist scholars, such as Barad but also Braidotti and Jasbir K. Puar, together. To tackle this problematic, a ‘robust account of the materialisation of all bodies – “human” and “nonhuman” – including the agential contributions of all material forces (both “social” and “natural”)’ (Barad 2007, 66) is needed. Such an account would move beyond the human-centred type of politics we know today and would start from the ethico-political reflection upon how certain bodies – whether human, non-human (or non/human[11]), more-than-human, or already dehumanised and constructed as disposable – come to matter and why (see Puar 2007; Chen 2012; Haraway 2016; Jackson 2020 for similar reflections). Before moving towards these critical new materialist reflections, however, we have to more exhaustively map the ways in which intersectional thinkers (and their critics) conceptualise identity.

Identity politics 1.0: Intersectional conceptualisations

Identity politics, as it historically has been defined, is a type of group politics that unites people around a shared identity. First coined by the Combahee River Collective in their manifesto “A Black Feminist Statement” ([1977] 1982), identity politics had a clear emancipatory overtone from the get-go. This original meaning stands in sharp contrast to how identity politics is politically instrumentalised – and even ridiculed – by its opponents today, as we saw earlier. Arguing against the monofocal perspectives on identity in the civil rights (i.e., focus on race/ethnicity, and specifically, Blackness), feminist (i.e., focus on gender), and gay (i.e., focus on sexual desire and orientation) movements at the time, while fighting against the societal status quo, the Collective brings a nuanced emancipatory politics to the table; an identity politics that focuses on ‘racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression’ and how these oppressive forces and structures are ‘interlocking’ (210) in nature and tend to reinforce one another. Taking their own lived experiences with ‘the manifold and simultaneous oppressions’ (210) as their leitmotiv, the Collective describe their activist-political praxis as follows:

> This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. (212)

Consciousness-raising about shared experiences of oppression – but also of privilege – that, once discussed, seem structural, lie at the heart of this multifocal identity politics. The Collective transcends the monofocal, often essentialising, and exclusionary definition of identity, as they themselves as subjects are living in a different onto-epistemologically structured reality: taking the dichotomised Marxist class struggle as their theoretical model but arguing that subjects should not be seen as ‘raceless, sexless workers’ (213), the Collective shows that a multitude of experiences of discrimination, oppression, and privilege exist that cannot be analytically expressed by one single category. As Black lesbians and working-class women, the Collective’s members know that a monofocal identity politics – or an ‘identity politics 1.0’ – could never fully represent their multi-layered lived realities. The above manifesto therefore implies a revolutionary onto-epistemological shift in theorising about lived identity as non-essentialist, embodied, affect-laden, and, most importantly, entangled; a shift that was later picked up by Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw in the fields of sociology and critical legal studies.

Further developed by Crenshaw (1989, 139), the activist politics practiced by the Collective got labelled as intersectional while zooming in on ‘the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience’. Revealing how there was no analytical space made for Black women’s simultaneous experiences with racism and sexism within antidiscrimination law and activism, Crenshaw pleas for an intersectional viewpoint, based on her now famous traffic intersection analogy. With said analogy, she demonstrates that Black women and women of colour are positioned on at least two intersecting axes of oppression, complicating their lived experiences. Crenshaw supports the Collective’s claim that only a more dynamic analytical model, together with a multifocal type of identity politics, adequately represents reality. Additionally, intersectionality is more than just a descriptive paradigm for Crenshaw: intersectional analyses can be employed to highlight how societal power structures and systems have impacted the ways in which we think about the world and theorise (or overlook) certain subjects’ experiences, while deconstructing the neoliberal, hyper-responsibilising belief that when individuals fail to get ahead in life, it must be their own fault. Intersectional thought is thus normative and at least partly visionary in nature, as it points at the fact that society could – and should – be reorganised differently.

Critical about how processes of hierarchical categorisation are deeply entrenched in society, all five named materialist theories of identity – feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledges, intersectionality, queer theory, and queer of colour critique – provide us with critical tools to examine power relations linked to identity mattering(s). And although some of the earlier forms of standpoint thinking were – when seen from a more contemporary perspective – painfully monofocal, several feminist standpoint projects, such as Mari J. Matsuda’s (1987) bottom-up feminist consciousness-raising and Chela Sandoval’s (1991) differential consciousness, already challenged the singular

subject, thereby moving beyond an identity politics 1.0 to highlight a more multifocal, coalitional politics. This is echoed in Haraway's situated knowledges and Crenshaw's intersectional approach or to put it in Crenshaw's (1991) own words: 'The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences' (1241). Crenshaw holds onto the Collective's 'identity politics 2.0' model, as I will call it here, as she still wishes to analyse and represent 'intragroup differences' (1241). And with such an intersectional view, we could slowly but surely come to understand that the 'identity groups in which we find ourselves in are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed' (1299).

Intersectionality thus provides us with a more holistic view of identity (politics): subjects consist of intersecting identities that are continuously shifting and evolving because of intersubjective interactions and lived experiences. One's situated positionality and the contexts one navigates, matter. Identity politics 2.0 – which takes difference and intragroup differences as its starting point – consists of various identity groups coming together as one or more coalition(s) to fight for the sake of social justice. This more coalitional take on identity politics has not prevented the philosophical foundations of intersectional theory from being questioned, however.

Identity politics 2.0: Queer intersectional conceptualisations

Intersectionality is often misunderstood as the flattening of differences. This 'critical', often outright hostile stance when it comes to intersectionality has grown more popular because of the rise in populist discourses linking it to 'wokeness' and critical race theory (in which intersectional thinking is embedded, as race/ethnicity is regarded as at least partly socially constructed) without delving into intersectionality's multifocality and critical race theory's nuances. Former President Donald Trump's (in Lang 2020, n. p.) 2020 directive perfectly illustrates this: by banning all so-called 'Marxist' critical race theory-inspired anti-bias and sensitivity trainings that were taking place in federal agencies, Trump attempted to rewrite the US's violent history and present while pandering to America's extreme right, alt-right, and white supremacists. Supported by an anti-Semitic 'Cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory (see Aerts 2020) claiming Marxism to be all about undermining Western culture through its supposed hyper-focus on identity, this anti-intersectionality move has been gaining foothold in political environments around the world. On the one hand, intersectionality is repoliticised through political 'anti-woke' targeting, whereas on an academic level, it underwent a mainstreaming process, having been uprooted from its Black feminist context. Queer of colour critique scholars Jennifer C. Nash (2008) and Jasbir K. Puar (2007, 211–215; 2012) have noted a couple of problems inherent in intersectionality. Nash (2008, 4) for example notes that in addition to an overfocus on Black women as 'prototypical

intersectional subjects' – a move that risks othering them all over again – intersectional theory needs a stronger methodological framework with which to better examine the 'messiness of subjectivity'. For Nash, intersectionality does not include a well-developed 'theory of agency' (11); making it difficult for intersectional thinkers to create space for the constant interplay between oppression and resistance – or the receiving-resisting dynamics described earlier in this chapter.

Puar (2012) underwrites Nash's criticism and moves towards a queer intersectional model, inspired by Foucauldian and Butlerian philosophy. The tensions between queer theory's anti-foundationalist, identity-disrupting paradigms and intersectionality are plenty. Butler, as well as Nash and Puar, makes these paradigms speak to one another. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) dismantles the idea of a unified subject and stable identity, shaking intersectional praxis to its core. But there is more: interpreting the category of Woman as a 'discursive formation' (3), implies that Butler must think about identity's limits and what it means to resist and/or subvert these formations. Regarding identity as a set of multiple, fluctuating, performative assemblages rather than one subject-defining characteristic (the monofocal approach central to early forms of feminist standpoint theory, early feminist and gay emancipatory movements, and faulty interpretations of intersectionality, i.e., identity politics 1.0), Butler's take on identity comes close to Haraway's situated knowledges and the intersectional paradigm of the Collective and Crenshaw (i.e., an identity politics 2.0 that conceptualises identities as dynamic). This 'antifoundational approach to coalitional politics' (Butler 1990, 21) – accentuating 'an emerging and unpredictable assemblage of positions' (20) – is a more differences-welcoming form of coalitional politics that critically tackles the othering moves attached to the present-day mainstreamed version of intersectionality.

This type of identity politics 2.0 with queer intersectional touches isn't practiced in a power free vacuum either, though. This indicates that certain intersecting identities tend to get prioritised over others, thereby replicating various societal divisions (see Cohen 1999). And, as also noted by Nash (2008), even such a queer intersectional coalitional model runs the risk of dividing subjects again. A coalitional intersectional model of identity thus has its issues too: the complex ontological intersections between different lived identity categories and labels are of course conceptualised with more nuance, but the dynamic co-constitution of various identity markers is still not represented in a very lived and lively manner. Intersectional thought is still quite rooted in a modern Western representationalist politics of recognition, in which that what is different is labelled as 'different-from'; as 'non'-normative and 'ab'-normal.

Identity (micro)politics 3.0: Assemblage- and interference-focused perspectives

Geerts, Evelien. 2025. “A Critical Cartography of the Mattering (s) of Identity Politics: Intersectional and Interferential Explorations.” In Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Taru Leppänen, Tara Mehrabi, and Milla Tiainen (eds.), *New Materialism and Intersectionality: Making Middles Matter*, pp. 180-201. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003404019.

Critical new materialist philosophies – especially those rooted in Deleuzoguattarian thought and feminist science studies – start from a different understanding of identity and difference. Doing away with all types of representationalist recognitional politics is of course not desirable – we are still very much in need of practical political models, even if they end up accidentally essentialising certain identity categories. But if we want to work towards a different imaginary and more just society, we need to realise that the ways in which identity and difference have been theorised in Western modern philosophy, are seriously flawed.

The above claim is not new: looking at the minoritarian Continental traditions, poststructuralists such as Luce Irigaray ([1974] 1985), but particularly Deleuze ([1968] 1994), together with his philosophical companion Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2005), and Braidotti ([1994] 2011), have criticised this negative identity versus difference dynamics. Especially Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* ([1968] 1994) and Braidotti’s oeuvre matter here, as it is in these works where, as Braidotti (1993, 5) explains, Western philosophy is revealed to be a ‘hegemonic discipline’ governed by ‘mechanisms of exclusion and domination’. Adding to that, Deleuze ([1968] 1994) states that difference has never been adequately conceptualised; it has merely been captured by this hegemonic discipline as something static, brimming with negativity. This claim is further anchored in Deleuze’s critique of Hegelian dialectics, in which negation is the legitimising motor of all change – including colonialism and other despicable barbarities. And it is this model that forms the foundation of the modern identity-based politics of recognition – whether framed in Hegelian (or Fukuyamaian), Marxist, existentialist, or feminist standpoint theoretical terms: in the end, one starts with two subjects desiring to be recognised, and apparently only one can receive authentic existential meaning through differing-from the other, engaging in a life-and-death-struggle if needed. Difference-as-difference-from – embodied by the wholly to-be-assimilated other – basically boils down to the fact that the Western modern philosophical conceptualisation of identity always takes place in competition with other identities-to-be-recognised, often leading to the politico-legal recognition of only those majority and minority subjectivities adhering to what has been constructed as normal. This is something that fits today’s hyper-individualised – and intersectional thought-opposing – neoliberal late capitalist context well: for example, queer subjects in the West are, for the most, tolerated, but only if they neatly assimilate and follow society’s (re)productivity norms.

Now, Butler’s queering, coalitional take on identity as an assemblage already brings us quite close to thinking difference differently. Assemblage has also made its way into critical new materialist philosophy via Deleuze and Guattari, who put the notion on the philosophical map in *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 2005). Assemblage – the commonly used translation of the French

l’agencement or the process of bringing things together and arranging them[12] – in the latter pair’s oeuvre stands for constantly changing constellations of heterogenous material agencies (think: bodies, territories, qualities, …) that come together to create something new, like little cogs, differing in size and speed, making up a clockwork. Assemblage implies a different type of ontology; a dynamic, processual ontology in which difference does not have to be put in dialectical opposition to something else to mean something (as is the case in Hegelian thought and its philosophical successors).

Puar (2012, 60), interestingly enough, picks up on Deleuzoguattarian assemblage in her critical new materialist critique of intersectional thinking. In Puar’s regard, reading intersectionality through assemblage theory and vice versa pushes intersectional thought – still ‘trapped within the logic of identity’ – to its limits. Identities and identification are, in fact, processes; ‘identity is an encounter, an event, an accident’ (59) as also depicted in Crenshaw’s intersections metaphor, but then theorised here without the paralysing characteristics of neatly demarcated lines crossing one another. The paradigm of assemblage – which combines the contextual, coalitional, and multifocal characteristics of situated knowledges and intersectionality – accentuates ‘the patterns of relations – [and] not the entities themselves, but the patterns within which they are arranged with each other’ (Puar 2012, 60–61).

An assemblage-focused perspective thus pushes all the aforementioned identity paradigms still enamoured by a macropolitical human-centred identity politics to their limits by focusing on micropolitical patterns, flows, encounters, and twists and turns. It is this Deleuzoguattarian accentuation of the micropolitical – present in many critical new materialists works – that is of interest here: with their analysis of micropolitics (in the form of ‘microfascisms’) in *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 2005, 214), Deleuze and Guattari reflect upon how human subjects – always part of human, non-human, and more-than-human assemblages – are not only disciplined by politico-legal institutions and their more or less visible power structures. They are also continuously shaped by neoliberal governmental micropolitical techniques, such as technological and algorithmic surveillance, interiorised self-disciplining forces, and other flows that all carry a certain amount of agential capacity.

This focus on the micropolitical is also present in critical new materialisms scene-setter Haraway’s (1997) work and that of Barad (2007), whose agential realist philosophy, as noted earlier, criticises Western modern philosophy’s individualist metaphysics by building on Haraway’s situated knowledges, the material-semiotic, and diffraction and interference patterns. Inspired by literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha’s ([1988] 1997) work (see Geerts and van der Tuin 2021), Haraway (1997, 16) turns diffraction – best visualised by the inference waves that come about when dropping a pebble into a pond – into ‘an optical metaphor’ that contrasts with traditional scientific thinking or ‘[r]eflexivity’.

Diffraction, together with the interference patterns it provokes, stands for a more ‘critical consciousness’ (273) that is not out to reproduce the same all over again, but allows differences to exist as differences. This is echoed by Barad’s take on diffraction ‘as a tool of analysis for attending to and responding to the effects of difference’ in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007, 72). This attunement to difference, together with the micropolitical, is what makes the notion of interference even more fascinating than assemblage: both Haraway (1988, 579–580) and Barad are invested in ‘modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made … in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life’ by thinking about the world from within the world. Because of both thinkers’ emphasis on situated knowledges and knowing in being, the paradigm of interference does not stay within the realm of the ontological: Haraway’s posthumanist critical realist and Barad’s agential realist philosophies think the ontological, epistemological, and ethico-political together.[13] By doing so, these philosophies create space for the examination of how all material beings ‘intra-act’ with one another and the world, and how, consequently, material-discursive agential cuts get made through these intra-actions that engender inclusions and exclusions by leaving ‘marks on bodies’ (Barad 2007, 178).

Taking up an interferential perspective as a researcher implies attuning oneself to the (non-)mattering(s) of identities, and, more simply put, the (de)humanisation of subjects through contemporary neoliberal society’s bio-/necropolitical flows of power. In Barad’s interference-charged agential realism, subjects only come into being through the dynamic, self-shaping intra-actions with each other and the world – which completely opposes neoliberalism’s hyper-individualistic ontology that regards subjects as disconnected little atoms.

Interference criticises the above hyper-individualist view of the world, or, as epistemologist Iris van der Tuin and myself (2013, 176) have put it elsewhere:

> Whereas the concept of interaction stands for a traditional atomist ontology in which subjects (or categories and axes, in epistemology) are seen as agents that exist prior to their actions, this [interferential] model accentuates that “distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad 2007, 33).

An interferential perspective builds upon all the foregoing materialist paradigms, and intersectionality – represented by Figure 1 below – in particular. In an interferential framework, identity categories and labels also intersect with one another and macro structures that oppress and/or privilege are to be scrutinised. But interference, in contrast to intersectionality, is all about micro

encounters. Subjects never pre-exist as such; in their micro encounters with human, but also non-human and more-than-human, others, they are always in a process of becoming, implying that their identities are relationally co-constituted as well. Identity-based differences are not immediately regarded as negative and polarising. And like crisscrossing interference patterns – as Figure 2 below illustrates – subjects, their assigned and chosen identities, and the societal structures that influence these identities and categorisation processes, are constantly in flux. Subjects and structures evolve and intra-act – and these structures are both 'exclusionary (i.e., they are *constraining*) and enabling (i.e., they allow for *surprises*)' (Geerts and van der Tuin 2013, 176, original emphasis), making it easier to analyse agency, resistance, and counter-actions than in most intersectional models. Because all kinds of embodied beings – human, non-human, more-than-human – are taken into account in such an interference-driven agential realist 'ethics of entanglement' (Barad 2011, 150), interference brings about an '(identity) micropolitics 3.0' with posthumanist touches.

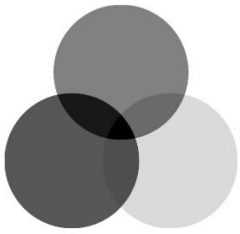


Figure 1. Intersectionality. Drawing by the author.

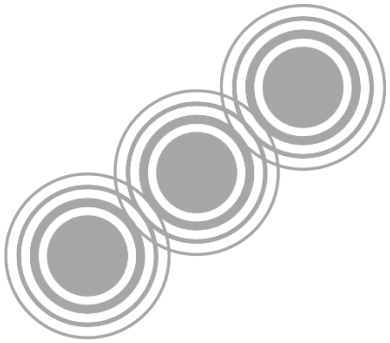


Figure 2. Interference. Drawing by the author.

Intersectional thought & praxis	**Interferential thought & praxis**
Static and top-down approach *vis-à-vis* power relations and structures	Dynamic, intra-active approach *vis-à-vis* power relations
Macro-level group analyses (institutional racism)	Macro-level and micro-level analyses, plus analyses of intersubjective encounters and intra-actions (microaggressions)
Individualistic ontology: subjects and socio-political recognition	Relational ontology: subjects and their encounters with others

Identity-based legal recognitional politics (monofocal and multifocal): o Identity politics 1.0 & 2.0 (of which 2.0 is depicted by Figure 1)	Different political model that does not regard Otherness as to-be-assimilated: o (Identity) micropolitics 3.0
Static and more pre-determined	Space for resistance and surprises

Table 1.1. A comparison between intersectional and interferential thought & praxis.

Conclusion: Visionary intersectional and interferential explorations

In this chapter, some of the more influential materialist theories on identity have been mapped out by means of a critical cartographical strategy that explicitly takes our present-day neoliberal political situation into account. Such a project does not intent to devalue intersectional takes on identity or even the identity politics 1.0-based monofocal articulations of identity: after all, all these critical materialist conceptualisations reveal something about the intricate workings of identity and difference. In this neoliberal day and age, in which extractive late capitalism, hyper-individualisation and hyper-responsibilisation, and bio-/necropolitics rule, an intersectional analytics uncovers how institutionalised patterns, structures, and practices of discrimination, oppression, and privilege operate in tandem with one another. But, in addition to such an intersectional analysis of what is essentially the macropolitical level, micropolitical encounters are omnipresent, too. These encounters require an analytical framework that does not bypass the powers of the macropolitical, plus a reckoning with the affect-laden micropolitics[14] of, for instance, microaggressions – an interesting explanatory example that wraps up this chapter.

Seen through the critical materialist lenses of feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledges, and intersectionality, there is a certain ephemerality to microaggressions – typically defined as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group' (Sue 2010, 5) – that hurts those targeted by them. Microaggressions, if even noticeable when seen through these three lenses, tend to be looked at through a simple sender-message-receiver dynamic. This not only stifles the vibrancy of the message and the provoked intense emotions, but also leaves absolutely no theoretical space for the receiver to resist and call out the sender in question. The togetherness of the material-discursive can at least be grasped via these lenses, but the affective dimension of the phenomenon cannot. Assemblage-

focused and interferential perspectives – driven by critical new materialisms that are more attuned to what Deleuzoguattarian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2017) sees as any body's capacity to affect and be affected – could account for that missing philosophical puzzle piece. As described in Table 1.1, assemblage and interference do not imagine identity as something static; they rather point at the ways in which identity is discursive-material-affective in nature and always relationally lived. Microaggressions or 'infinitesimal hostilities' (van der Tuin 2016, 247) cannot be fully grasped by intersectional thought: intersectionality is an excellent critical tool to unpack the intersecting systems of for instance sexism and racism that are operating behind these phenomena, but it cannot explain how these microaggressions affectively touch and – often quite literally – weigh people down. Nor can intersectionality examine the sudden shifting – and retipping – of the scales of power when the person afflicted calls the microaggressor out on their actions, for instance. Another advantage attached to interferential thinking is its accentuation of the relational and all types of mattering(s): by replacing the identity versus difference model with a more relational difference-as-differing one, interference challenges human-centred identity-based politico-legal models of recognition – without however letting go of recognition where needed.

Although we will probably never be able to philosophically capture all of lived life's complexities, this chapter has tried to push the conceptualisation of identity – now increasingly linked to the dangerously repoliticised matter of identity politics – towards something that is of discursive-material-affective nature. By mapping out several materialist conceptualisations of identity, plus the different identity politics models based on them, I have argued for a critical new materialist interferential perspective that could, in dialogue with more multifocal forms of intersectionality, help us understand identity and difference through the lens of micro encounters. Such an interferential model – and the (identity) micropolitics 3.0 it engenders – makes room for an analysis of macro- and micro-environments, contexts, and forces. It additionally possesses the potential to transcend the identity politics conundrum with which all sides of the political spectrum anno 2023 seem to be so obsessed. Once we learn to see identity and difference differently, i.e., not as an assimilation and erasure-focused Apartheid type of difference (Minh-ha [1988] 1997), the visionary potential of intersectional and interferential viewpoints becomes clear.

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[1] Next to containing an edited table from Geerts 2019, this chapter – written in the context of the ERC-funded project “Urban Terrorism in Europe (2004–19): Remembering, Imagining, and Anticipating Violence” (ERC-2019-STG 851329) – elaborates on Geerts and van der Tuin 2013.

[2] One’s lived sense of self – expressible via (re)claimed labels – does not always correspond to one’s public self or the self that one is interpellated to be, and this especially rings true for marginalised subjects. See Alcoff 2000.

[3] In this chapter, the notion of mattering(s) is used to point at the matter of identity (lived identity-fuelled experiences), the matterings (materialisations) of identity, and the ethico-political mattering of identity and identity politics. By employing this concept, space is created for non-mattering – often dehumanising – processes as well, which is an important focus in critical new materialist thought.

[4] ‘Critical’ here refers to the emancipatory focus present in many critical new materialisms, as most of these post-poststructuralist philosophies have been inspired by feminist, queer, and critical race studies and their power analytics. This links critical new materialisms to the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory (see Horkheimer [1937] 2002). Important to note is that critical new materialist philosophies take up a special position in the contemporary landscape of new materialist, posthumanist, post-qualitative, and affect theoretical thought, as these philosophies explicitly address the bio-/necropolitical macro- and micro-webs of power the human subject, but also the dehumanised, the non-human, and the more-than-human, are affected by. These critical new materialisms furthermore are invested in ethico-politically reflecting upon processes of (non-)mattering and dehumanisation. Also see Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, Geerts et al. 2019 (https://dhstatic.hum.uu.nl/digicart/), and Geerts 2021, 2022 for situated cartographies of (critical) new materialist thought.

[5] *La Manif pour Tous* organises regular protests against France’s gay marriage act and what they perceive to be “unnatural” gender theory, whereas *Schild & Vrienden* is a Flemish Belgian alt-right movement that revolts against anything that does not promote ‘traditional’ values.

[6] While arguing for a Hegelian theory of universal recognition, Fukuyama (2018, vi) criticises the particular zooming in on ‘nation, religion, sect, race, ethnicity, or gender’ supposedly happening in contemporary identity politics and even labels the latter as ‘one of the chief threats’ of ‘modern liberal democracies’.

[7] Although I am referring to the Trumps, Bolsonaros, and Orbáns of the world here, it is important to note that body-less – almost god trick-like – positions are never fully fixed. These subject positions are mostly occupied by those privileged by socio-political power structures, but, given that structures are changeable, said positions can shift too.

[8] Identity politics in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“Identity Politics” 2020b, n. p.) is defined as ‘the adherence by a group of people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to political beliefs or goals specific to the group concerned, as opposed to conforming to traditional broad-based party politics’.

[9] I refer to anthropologist Gloria Wekker’s (2016) ‘race/ethnicity’ (23) concept here, as ethnicity in European debates often involves covered up processes of racialisation.

[10] See Geerts 2021, 2022 for these and other influences on – and variations of – critical new materialist theory.

[11] See Henriksen and Radomska 2015, where the porous boundaries between the human and ‘non/human’ are expressed by means of a queering forward slash.

[12] ‘Arrangement’ would be a better translation, as *agencement* expresses both an arrangement and the active act of arranging. ‘Assemblage’ therefore comes across as less dynamic than ‘arrangement’.

[13] This is demonstrated by Harawayan situated knowledges and Baradian ‘knowing in being’ (2007, 185) and ‘ethico-onto-epistem-ology’ (90) that express the entanglements between ethics, ontology, and epistemology when it comes to producing knowledge about the world. This creates an ethical obligation to philosophise about the world with care. Also see Geerts and Carstens (2019) for more on these concepts.

[14] For the sake of the argument, I am putting the idea that the ‘micro-’ in microaggressions could also be theorised as but another effect of a macropolitics of oppression between brackets. Looked at through an intersectional-interferential perspective, macro and micro levels are of course always intimately connected.