A good, solid, history-writing practice is one which, I think, shakes people’s ideas of the world and their place in it, compelling them to imagine new social, cultural and political formations which can provide an account of life. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s development of the term ‘intersectionality’, and the ways it has been taken up by people of colour within the academy internationally, as well as by activists, provides one example of such imaginative work. Because when you spend some time in the Australian History academic scene, at conferences, in departments, talking to other academics, it’s quickly noticeable that one of its key features is its hegemonic whiteness. Even in those spaces that aspire to avoid whiteness, it’s inescapable, visible daily, as well as in the themes at conferences, the keynote speakers chosen, the food served, the knowledge shared. When it came time for the Australian Women’s History Network conference in 2016, which carried the theme of ‘Intersections in History’, it felt like this could provide a way of modelling a different kind of Australian academic History space. What would a conversation look like that skipped over the presence of white Anglo Australians, I wondered? What if we just left them to the side? What if we gathered together some of the smartest, sharpest thinkers in Melbourne academia, and spoke amongst ourselves, coming up with new formations of knowledge? And so we did: Crystal, Samia, Ruth and Carolyn gathered together, I asked them some questions, and we had a conversation that, in numerous ways, challenged white hegemonies. We’ve recreated some of that conversation below, as a way of continuing to think together, and to find new ways of making this thinking public.

Jordana Silverstein: What does intersectionality mean to you? What histories of the term, and its usage, do you find useful? Alternatively, do you not find the term useful? Why not?

Samia Khatun: I understand intersectionality as a call for scholarship and activism that thinks across the categories of rule and thought that we in Australia today have inherited from colonial rule. In challenging us to think at the same time about race, class and gender for example, intersectionality was first articulated as the need to see the multiple axes along which power relations are enacted onto and experienced by people. For me the term intersectionality is most useful as a challenge to use multiple lenses to talk about power in our thinking and activism—so I have always understood the term as a challenge to think in an interdisciplinary way as well.

What bothers me about the metaphor, perhaps indicative of how it has aged since Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and others first started using it in the 1980s, is that it imprisons us within the language
of liberalism in our critiques of difference and power. The metaphor was developed in dialogue with the failures of anti-discrimination legislation in the US. ‘Intersectionality’ Crenshaw reflected recently ‘was a way of addressing what it was that the courts weren’t seeing’. Hence, the metaphor was about making visible to institutions of power the way that social identities intersect, without necessarily challenging the very existence of those institutions.

But if you push this line of thought a bit further, particularly in colonial contexts like Australia, it’s obvious that the very production of social identities is done by the colonisers and is about setting the terrain where power will operate. If we take Australian race relations history for example, systems of rule that the institutions of settler colonialism introduced were underpinned by the production of racial categories of: (1) White Settlers (2) Indigenous People (3) Non-White settlers. In the South Asian context, British rule was underpinned by the production of the categories (1) Hindus (2) Muslims (3) Christians, and so on. ‘Religion’ there served as the primary category of colonial difference rather than ‘race.’ In both these colonial contexts, knowledge production in the humanities and social sciences came to be about the production and definition of these categories from the late nineteenth century, yoked to the institutions of statecraft and nation building. So while the metaphor of intersectionality in an Australian context might make you think about how a person is both Asian and a worker, or in a South Asian context Muslim and a woman, the entire metaphor takes for granted that tedious liberal story about humans: that we are individuals with attributes such as ‘race’, ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘religion’. Rather than buying this story that theorises humans as deviations from a white, male, propertied, heterosexual, Protestant-but-secular individual, I want to look at how the colonial production of these categories continues to set the very terms in which we talk about difference. What I am more interested in is thinking about how to situate activism and scholarship on terrains other than liberalism—this I think is one of the biggest challenges at this historical moment for anyone who understands themselves to be engaged in anticolonial activism and thought.

Crystal McKinnon: When I think about intersectionality, the first thing that comes to mind is its history as a Black African American feminist interjection and movement, as first theorised by Kimberle Crenshaw. Understanding and honouring this history is important, and I think doing this is practicing an intersectional politic, as to not understand this is to remove it from its context and erase African American women and their histories.

I find intersectionality a useful way to think about how power structures interact, and how people experience oppression in different configurations, and the way that these oppressions overlap, and consequently are experienced in varying ways—with some oppressions being more present in different circumstances. It also allows us to understand how people can experience privilege and oppression at the same time—that people have multi-layered identities.

Over many years, when numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander feminists, such as Melissa Lucashenko and Jackie Huggins, have said that they experience being Indigenous as their primary oppression, which eclipses other oppressions like gender and class, this to me is an Indigenous intersectional theorising. For most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the way that our bodies and minds are racialised inform our experiences of gender, class, ability, health, sexuality and so on.

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Ruth DeSouza: As a nurse, educator and researcher, intersectionality as a framework has helped me complement my professional socialisation in a reductive focus on the singular. That is, nursing has been shaped by biomedicine and epidemiology and to a lesser extent the psychosocial and biobehavioural. The limitations of these frameworks are evident in the minimal impact they have had on health disparities among particular social groups including those who are racialised and classed, paving the way for alternative frameworks including feminist, racial/ethnic and other critical scholarly traditions. Intersectionality offers possibilities for providing new kinds of knowledge that can contribute to eliminating health disparities across multiple categories including race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class and socioeconomic status. There’s an acknowledgement that multiple social identities at an individual or micro level intersect with multiple-level social inequalities at the macro structural level.

I also see parallels in the deployment of intersectionality as a black feminist intervention to challenge a reductionist focus on a single axis of difference within a largely white feminist frame, and nursing as a highly gendered profession shaped by whiteness and class. In nursing, the workforce is stratified hierarchically, that is educators, researchers and managers who are primarily white and male are clustered at the top of the hierarchy, with nurses of colour clustered at the lower ends of the hierarchy in fewer management and educational settings and in unpopular clinical contexts including aged care. The value of intersectionality theory is that it offers an alternative to a universal gendered experience by articulating race and class as systems of oppression that are mutually constituted and that work together simultaneously to produce inequality. In health most understandings of migration and health have made individualised notions of acculturation central without attention to the social determinants of health, including racism, in generating both disease and health inequalities. As Viruell-Fuentes et al., note, racism interacts with other forms of oppression to affect the health of immigrants. Cultural safety knowledge derived from indigenous nurses in New Zealand similarly attempts to address the effects of structural factors on health. I’ve written elsewhere that ‘Intersectionality might allow us to engage in cultural safety, to see how our “selves” intersect with the institutional, geopolitical and material aspects of our roles; to consider the investments and conditions that enable us to care and to interrogate the constraints and accountabilities that influence our practice.

Carolyn D’Cruz: As a term, intersectionality enables an immediate recognition of the impossible yet necessary task of thinking a number of differences at once, which mark social groupings of identity. Race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and nationality are a few of the groupings that mark us into identity categories that affect who we think we are, who others think we are, and what kind of life chances we acquire on the basis of these markers of difference. The cultural grid we have to make sense of our differences, however, operates as if identity categories are discrete and so foreclose thinking and action around these markers as intersecting vectors of power relations, classificatory procedures of governance and disciplinary infrastructures of knowledge construction. But a person is never simply working class,

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for example. They are also gendered, racialised, marked or assumed as having a sexuality, or perceived as marked or unmarked with specific dis/abilities. This is the case for any identity, but each of these categories carries their own specific histories and entanglements within a grid of power relations, legislation and governance, and ways of classifying and making sense of the world. To think of these identity categories as disconnected from one another is to ignore the historical circumstances in which they are entangled. To insist on these categories in isolation is to also reinforce misguided ideas that identities are pre-packaged traits and characteristics that we are born with at the cost of situating how their meaning and status in the world shifts through space and time.

Obviously, what the term has come to mean for me does not completely coincide with the term’s original coining and earlier usages; but I cannot articulate what I have under the auspices of ‘intersectionality’ without the heritage of Black feminists in America introducing the term to capture some of the exclusionary practices and blind-spots of white feminism. At the same time, while intersectionality might not have been coined in Australia, Indigenous women were certainly pointing out that feminism on its own—particularly when inflected with white privilege—was not good enough to capture the complexity of how race and gender intersect. The same could be said for sexuality. Lesbians were once perceived as the ‘lavender menace’ within the women’s movement, supposedly bringing disrepute to the feminist agenda. So it pays to remember that collisions and intersections within feminism, for instance, were occurring long before the term acquired traction. My favourite example of this is Sojourner Truth’s ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ speech in 1851, in Ohio. In other words, questioning the coherence of woman as a category is not something that just appeared in the 1990s with poststructuralist theory.

What is the relationship between intersectionality and marginality?

CD: As far as I am aware it is only those who have a stake in marginality that maintain an interest in intersectionality. There is no need to think of a multi-faceted approach to how identity works through politics or a multiple-axis framework in law if one sides with the mainstream or dominant culture.

But no single axis of identity can capture the muck of people’s actual subjectivities, so it seems more productive to work through how the categories of marginal identities intersect. What marginal identities share is their joint entanglement in histories, international and local flows of capital and labour and forms of governance, among other things, in the making of nation-states that situate disadvantage of social groupings as a fault innate to the identity rather than an historically cultivated one. The machinations of how exclusion, suppression and oppression work in nation-states, whose culture is predominately unified through those who are relegated to the margins, is something that is obscured from dominant narratives of history and visible cultural memory. The principle behind an intersectional approach is to force recognition of shared investment and solidarity between different forms of marginality. The shared investment does not stem from benevolence to one another, but obligation.

SK: Crenshaw coined the metaphor in 1980s Manhattan. Whose roads are these? Who designed the grid, and then who built them? Whose land is the entire structure on? How does the grid itself marginalise people, transforming some people into so-called ‘minorities’ in the imperial gaze while supposedly being able to serve the interests of the ‘majority’? For me these are the most productive questions that arise if we try and think about the relationship between intersectionality and marginality.
**CM:** People on the margins of society are often those who would be living with multiple forms of oppressions, so intersectionality provides a way to think about how these intersect and operate. Intersectionality also allows us to think about systemic and institutional power, and how it operates to produce marginality, and how it centres and normalises white settler heteronormativity.

**RD:** Theoretically we all have intersectional identities; however, central to intersectionality is the emphasis on the intersecting identities of people who are marginalised in order to attend to the power relations that can be observed there and transformed. I am conscious too that although intersectionality is mobilised to theorise about difference it can reify difference, by denoting ‘difference from’, the implicit norm, the ‘white woman’.  

How has the term ‘intersectionality’ been (mis)appropriated? Is the term useful outside of its original context? Does it have strategic value in Australia? What does it mean to mobilise it in an Australian context?

**CM:** In the past decade or so, intersectionality has become more of a term present in popular culture to rally against systemic oppression, and white liberal feminism. It calls out feminism that is white, cis-gendered, middle and upper class, able-bodied, and resists this type of feminism that doesn’t reflect or include women who don’t fit these categories.

As a settler state where colonisation continues, any feminist or left movement in Australia must first and foremost centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignties. Any circumstance or movement must consider how Indigenous people and nations are affected, and listen to and incorporate the Indigenous owners of the land where the movement or event or protest is occurring. This may contradict the needs or original desires of the movement, the Jabiluka protest in the 1990s for example, but this should then push people to consider how their movement is oppressing Indigenous nations and voices. Does your movement uplift, or oppress other groups of people? Intersectionality in this way provides the tools to consider other people’s experiences in varying circumstances.

**RD:** My concerns about using the term intersectionality in an Australian context are drawn from my reading of Puar’s work. The first is that intersectionality as an activist and theoretical discourse comes from a very specific history and trajectory: a lineage of black US feminists, including Sojourner Truth and Kimberle Crenshaw. My second concern is about how intersectionality as an analytic lens can be mobilised in neoliberal capitalism. As Puar asks, ‘What does an intersectional critique look like?’ ‘What does it do?’ ‘Does it collude with liberal multicultural mainstream mechanisms for accommodating difference?’ If as Bilge notes, we assume that the emphasis of neoliberalism is on individual entrepreneurship, then there’s an assumption that the conditions that have created injustice have been managed. Bilge cautions that neoliberal regimes have commodified and colonised intersectionality, depoliticising and transforming a radical politics of social justice into a corporatised diversity tool to achieve ideological and institutional goals and erasing a transgressive activist history.

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8 Ibid.
SK: I think it still has use, particularly in the classroom where you are trying to convey the multiple axes along which power works in liberal discourse. I think it’s also a really useful metaphor to point out that power is usefully thought of as a terrain, or a space. Its strategic value of course is when activists are talking to power—and we must. People are in prisons, detention centres and entrapped in a number of modern institutions that set the terrain of what racialised power looks like in our world today. The language of intersectionality is powerful in our conversations with these institutions.

CD: Its most unproductive or misappropriate use is when it gets thought like an additive formula, which gets applied to any site aiming to be more diverse and inclusive. I notice this within all sorts of bureaucratic policies, from workplace to government departments, and the organisation of events and rallies in some activist circles. Intersectionality becomes a way of presenting one discrete identity marker after another, rather than as approaching differences within differences.

Rather than thinking intersectionality in terms of identity categories, it is more productive to outline the various institutional sites and historical, political and economic circumstances that give rise to such categories. My own schooling for doing so is articulated in terms of the material conditions of social existence (to use Marxist terms), the various axes of power/knowledge relations (to use Foucault’s terms) and the infrastructures that render these things intelligible or not quite (to rewrite Derrida’s terms), while also attending to the governance and regulation of people through ‘white, patriarchal sovereignty’ (Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s term), the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler’s term) or reproductive heteronormativity (Spivak’s term), and the pervasiveness of phallogocentric logic (with reference to French feminist like Cixous and Irigaray).

Intersectionality is useful in Australia, as the identity categories here emerged through similar formations in the USA with regard to the settler colonial context. For those of us living in settler colonial democracies, liberation movements cannot claim solidarity or the pursuit of justice without also confronting the fact that the very foundations and possibility of organising in a country like Australia is founded upon the usurpation of Aboriginal sovereignty. We cannot claim to be a country of self-governance if self-determination for those who are the traditional custodians of this land is continually undermined. To take this forward, an intersectional approach would also be mindful of all the other categories of identity that have been marked as less than qualified for citizenship or self-determination.

How do we write histories, and understand lives, in ways which can escape that which the patriarchy, colonisation and capitalism have handed us?

CD: I do not think we can escape the histories and dominant narratives that condition the cultural grid from which we understand our lives; but we can contest them, write counter-narratives and subvert and displace their hold. Movements to write history from below, to form consciousness-raising groups, to cultivate decolonial thought and action and to seize the tools of otherness for our own purposes have an enormously rich heritage, which is very hard to access in mainstream institutions. Working class, feminist, decolonial, queer and crip writing and action is full of counter histories and alternative narratives for understanding our lives. The casualties of the power relations we try to name through capitalism, colonisation and patriarchy are poorly represented across the board in institutional sites and thus most often lack a level of audibility and visibility in which the marginal can ‘find themselves’. I don’t mean that in a hippy-dippy kind of way. I literally mean, it is hard to make sense of oneself well when most grids of
intelligibility do not have a name for you or have derogatory names for you, suppress or exclude you, and render you a menace to society and national unity. The way to write history and understand our lives more truthfully, ethically and politically progressively then, is to exert force on those pressure points that can render marginal voices and lives more audible and visible, with the aim of changing the circumstances that continue to deny justice.

**SK:** For historians I think the first step is taking a hard look at the role of history as a discourse in creating, supporting and perpetuating systems of power. National history, emerging as a form in the late nineteenth century, has long been a key instrument in imperial political projects. English language history books train readers, and often institutionally powerful audiences to inhabit certain trajectories connecting past, present and future—they work by making possible the kinds of futures readers can imagine and see. History, or stories about the past, in the knowledge systems of colonised peoples, I have found, offers strategies for imagining futures beyond liberal horizons. For myself, I have found that involvement in activism in even the smallest of ways has time and time again proved crucial to keeping focus on the intended destination point: escape from power.

**What does it look like to write an intersectional history while living in an Australia shaped by colonisation, reconciliation, detention, deterrence, and austerity? What is included in Australian histories?**

**SK:** People who actually have to live the onslaught of power regimes in multiple directions, of course do not have to do any work to think intersectionality. A single black mother, when she can’t get housing in Melbourne or Sydney *knows* that both race and gender violence is being enacted, even if this is not the language in which they may negotiate/critique the violence. For people in universities, articulating intersectionality according to the forms of knowledge recognised by institutions of power I think opens up the possibility of visualising how multiple structures of power operate on people at an individual level. The trick of course is being aware of the way that evoking intersectionality alone doesn’t get us out of the prisonhouse of white thought.

Because I understand liberalism to be the central ideology underpinning imperial power relations *today,* my own approach has been to try and write history texts that don’t just reproduce liberal subjectivities. So one particular approach is to write histories about how people are assaulted by different forms of power, while highlighting the range of non-liberal narrative strategies that we can use to make sense of and order these experiences.

**CD:** Up until a few years ago, I sought to erase my own voice and experiences out of the picture of how I spoke about history. I get asked to give an account of myself and explain my identities to too many strangers and bureaucratic institutions for my own liking and still do not think my identity markers and life experiences is anyone’s business. But the longer I work in a field that takes responsibility for situating knowledge in relation to the experiences of the marginal, the more obligated I feel to disclose my own complicity and stakes in something like Australian histories.

Having taught and written in an area like gender sexuality and diversity studies, which cannot but negotiate with the uneven playing field of identity markers, I aim for a kind of writing that renders projects for justice more accessible, audible and visible to those *both* on the margins and centre of public discussion.
In writing, I have begun to connect my own story to the grander narratives of official history. This is because I have come to believe that the situation in which my own identity markers have acquired significance can speak about Australian history with more force and interest than if I were to take my partiality out of the picture.

We can look at the patterns of what kinds of bodies are more likely to be incarcerated, murdered, subjected to abuse, affected by austerity, or perceived as irritants to the harmony of national unity, and we will see a disproportionate number of those with the markings of marginality, specific *types* of people and beings and particular ways of thinking. Intersectional history would make evident that which is obscured by the idea that the state is neutral and individuals are actually on a level playing field when it comes to negotiating one’s life chances. Stories from below, which acknowledge how they are contaminated by the structures of power from above, will keep finding ways through the cracks and faulty foundations in which official history has been told thus far. At different moments and spaces, the cracks and fault lines give way to seismic shifts in thought and action, which makes room for coalition politics and the formation of solidarity between movements. Anything that contributes to the building of solidarity and enacts change for the multiplicity of those who are disenfranchised would be intersectional history at its best.

**RD:** I want to ask how we practice ethically as nurses in Australia, because I think that’s where history is critically important. That is, unless we understand history, there is no context for understanding the health and wellbeing of the people that live here, starting with Indigenous people. I don’t think that we can escape patriarchy, colonisation and capitalism, but we can effectively nurse people and their families if we are cognisant of macro-structural factors such as colonisation, reconciliation, detention, deterrence, and austerity and how they impact on the multiple social identities at an individual or micro level.

**CM:** To me, intersectionality is a conscious politic. It is not simply writing about say, a history of working class women or of Aboriginal women, and therefore your work is intersectional. Intersectionality is not simply writing about people who experience multiple oppressions—it is an intentional way of thinking and writing. Intersectionality calls for a deep consideration of multiple categories of identity and analysis in one’s work and rejects singular, grand narratives of history.

I am not sure that we can escape patriarchy, colonisation or capitalism, but we can work every day in strategic ways to move towards freedom from this in the future. For me, centring my and other Indigenous people’s sovereignty is first and foremost, and from there decolonisation strategies originate and develop. One of the ways that I like to work towards decolonisation of my work, which is primarily focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, is to privilege using Aboriginal and Indigenous voices. I believe who you cite matters, and who you look towards for your knowledge basis and formation of your thoughts and arguments matters. If you are teaching a class on Aboriginal Gender and Sexualities for instance, use Aboriginal voices—and within that, also make sure you use Aboriginal voices who are queer, and who identify as Trans or as a Sistergirl or Brothaboy, and who are gender non-conforming. This to me is enacting an intersectional politic in the classroom.