

# INTERSECTIONALITY & FEMINISM

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by Anna Carastathis

What do intersections have to do with feminism? Or with our lives as women and girls? Quite a lot, it turns out.

Maybe you've heard this word thrown around in feminist classrooms or activist spaces. Maybe you haven't, but feel some frustration with the way generalizations about women and girls don't really describe your own experiences.

Maybe you've experienced being asked to focus on one aspect of who you are, and to ignore other aspects. Maybe you have been told that your identity is too complex for feminism, or you've seen that some versions of feminism pit your identity as a woman or girl against your other identities.

Maybe you've asked yourself, how do the parts of my identity relate to each other? What parts of my identity are relevant to feminism as a movement to end the oppression of women and girls? Why are some parts seen as relevant while others are dismissed or discounted in feminist organizing?

My name is Anna Carastathis. I live in Montréal and I study and teach feminist political theory at McGill and Concordia.

Today I'm going to talk to you about intersectionality as a language for identity forged through systematic social relations of oppression and privilege.

I opened this essay by naming a range of experiences that intersectionality tries to answer.

In what follows, I'm going to explain what "intersectionality" means, where it comes from, and how it is used to make feminism a movement that speaks for all of us, not just women with privilege who are able to hijack feminism for their own particular interests.

To do this, I might have to use a bunch of words that make you go "say *wha...?*" When you have a "say *what?*" moment, take a look at the glossary at the bottom of this entry, which gives you definitions of some of the technical words I'm throwing at you. (Scroll down, way down...)

And if anything is still unclear, feel free to ask for clarification by leaving a comment. I'll be around throughout the blogging campaign to answer your questions and comments.

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The word “intersectionality” comes out of a metaphor coined by the critical legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to explain how race oppression and gender oppression interact in Black women’s lives.

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 1989. P149).

In the 1980s, Crenshaw was trying to understand why US anti-discrimination law was failing to protect Black women in the workplace, and she discovered it was because the law distinguished between two kinds of discrimination: gendered discrimination and racialized discrimination.

That is, US law distinguished between discrimination against women (on the basis of their gender) and discrimination against Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous people (on the basis of their race).

But in her study of discrimination in workplaces, Crenshaw observed that Black women were discriminated against on both bases – their gender and their race – at once.

So, for example, Black women were the last group to be hired at a workplace she studied – after white women and Black men. When the boss decided to lay people off, Black women were fired because they were the least senior – the last to arrive. But that they were hired last was itself due to discrimination. This group of Black women took the company to court and the judge said, “there’s no gender discrimination here because white women weren’t fired. And there’s no race discrimination here because Black men weren’t fired.”

So, Crenshaw concluded that discrimination against Black women in the workplace – as *Black women* – was invisible to legal concepts of discrimination that saw it in terms of

“gender” only or in terms of “race” only. Black women’s experiences of discrimination were rendered invisible by these ways of categorizing discriminatory practices.



*(Image: Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw)*

Crenshaw argued that a similar thing happened in US feminist movements. Black women’s issues – and the issues facing other women of colour, lesbians, and working class white women – became invisible as privileged white women defined “gender discrimination” and “gender oppression” in terms of their own particular experiences. They then overgeneralized those experiences and claimed they were shared by all women. But they weren’t.

The problem was (and is) that although women of colour, lesbians, and working class women were always active in feminism in the US and Canada, feminism became dominated by white upper class women who retained identifications with men and white male power.

They weren’t willing to trade in the power they got from being wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters to powerful white men in order to forge true unity with women of colour and with working class white women. In other words, they weren’t willing to give up on the small privileges they gained through loyalty to white men and to whiteness in order to work for the liberation of all women (Adrienne Rich, [1978] 1979.)

bell hooks writes that

As women, particularly [...] privileged white women, began to acquire class power without divesting of their internalized sexism, divisions between women intensified. When women of color critiqued the racism within the society as a whole and called attention to the ways that racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and hearts. And that was equally true when it came to the issue of classism among women (bell hooks, 2000, p16-17).



*(Image: bell hooks)*

Despite the diversity of women in the feminist movement, and the increasing divergence between women's interests, privileged white feminists hijacked feminism for their own immediate interests. Let me give you three examples.

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### **(1) First example: Reproductive Rights.**

Privileged white feminists fought for reproductive rights like abortion and adequate contraception, under the banner of "choice," but ignored the widespread forced sterilization of Black and Indigenous women as well as of women with disabilities, in the US and Canada.

Worse than this, some women's rights campaigns for abortion actually advocated involuntary sterilization of poor women of colour. Birth control for wealthy white women was seen as going hand in hand with population control of poor communities of colour (primarily Indigenous, Black and poor white people).

For instance, Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, forgot her working class origins and betrayed her early militant politics in advocating in the 1920s and 30s the "strategic" sterilization of "unfit" mothers (Angela Davis, 1981, p212-215).

According to Women of All Red Nations (WARN), an Indigenous feminist organization, 50% of First Nations women in territories occupied by the US had been sterilized in the 1970s, and that sterilization rates were as high as 80% on some reservations (Andrea Smith, 2005, p82-83).

Similarly in Canada, sterilization of Indigenous women was widespread. However, less accurate estimates exist, in part because records were often deliberately destroyed by hospital administrators. In Alberta, the Sexual Sterilization Act was passed in 1928 by the Legislative Assembly of the province. Under the act, over 4,000 cases were heard by the Alberta Eugenics Board. The act legalized forced sterilization of women deemed "mentally deficient" and was used against Indigenous (including Métis) women and other racialized women. One of the proponents of the act was a first-wave feminist,

Emily Murphy, who was also the first female magistrate of the British Empire. The Sterilization Act remained in force into the 1970s, until it was repealed in 1972.

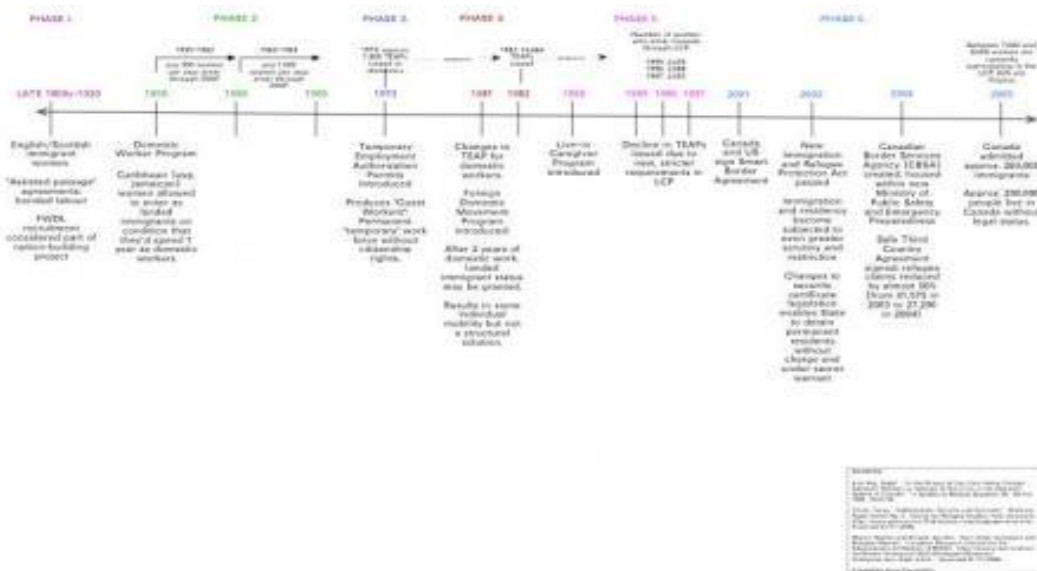
## (2) Second example: Work

Privileged white feminists fought for increased access to professional jobs that were male dominated, ignoring the fact that women of colour, immigrant women, and working class white women were being overworked, often in places far away from their families, just to survive and support their children -- sometimes in white feminists' homes, cleaning their floors and caring for their children.

For privileged white feminists, the problem became the “double shift”: working during the day in a professional job, and coming home in the evening only to work more, caring for their husbands and children.

To lessen this workload, instead of demanding that their husbands pull their weight, or that the state provide an adequate accessible childcare, domestic work became offloaded to women of colour. Since the late 1800s, the Canadian government ran a series of programs recruiting migrant women workers to do domestic labour in Canada (see timeline below, “Foreign Waged Domestic Labour in Canada”).

TIMELINE: Foreign Waged Domestic Labour in Canada



The current government program to recruit migrant women domestic workers is called the “Live-in Caregiver Program” (LCP). In 2005, between 7000-8000 women were working in Canada under this program. 82% of them were from the Philippines. Through the LCP, workers are allowed to enter and reside in Canada on the condition that they live in their employer’s home and perform domestic service.

LCP workers are allowed to apply for landed immigrant status after completing 2 years of full-time work within 3 years of arriving in Canada. But there is no guarantee that they (or their families) will be allowed to immigrate.

This sets up an unjust situation where women participating in the LCP are “good enough to work, but not good enough to stay” permanently in Canada.

As Harsha Walia writes,

The [Canadian] state’s practice of denying permanent legal status to most [migrant workers] guarantees that a growing number of migrants will constitute a highly exploitable pool of labour [...]

Migrant women of colour on temporary work visas most directly experience the hypocrisy of liberal democracies that promise opportunity while creating categories of exploited workers” (Harsha Walia, 2006. Pp 24-25)

Groups like PINAY in Montréal and INTERCEDE in Toronto fight these discriminatory, exploitative temporary work programs, and provide women who work in them with resources and support. But the wider feminist movement has not taken the government on to demand citizenship status for migrant women workers, or – in the shorter term – for the improvement of their working conditions.

Women became divided on issues of labour, not only because some women had something to gain from exploiting other women (for instance, as domestic workers in their homes), but because of their choices about how to fight patriarchal exploitation. Rather than fighting to change men’s oppressive dependence on women, they hired other women to do the undervalued work that is called “women’s work” in our society. Or, when they did fight men about domestic labour, for instance demanding wages for housework, they ignored the exploitation of women who did, already, get wages for housework.

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### **(3) Third example: the State**

privileged white women fight for better political representation in the government and other state institutions – for instance, they fight to get more women members of

parliament (MPs) in Canada, or more Supreme Court judges. In the current parliament, only about 21% of MPs are women. Fewer still, about 6%, are people of colour. Even fewer 1.9% (or, six MPs) identify as Indigenous people.

But this kind of feminist fight for better political representation ignores the ways the Canadian state – as a colonial state of a nation of settlers built on stolen Indigenous land – systematically oppresses First Nations women, and exploits immigrant women's labour.

Getting more (white) women into parliament lends legitimacy to the Canadian government. That is, it makes it seem as if the government can do good things for women, if only the right people were to run it.

But Indigenous women whose ancestors were displaced from their territories and forced onto reserves, cut off from their spirituality, their languages, systems of governance, whose children were stolen and put into residential schools or white foster homes, know otherwise about the Canadian government, which did all these things.

They know this government isn't legitimate, and they knew more women MPs couldn't make it so. The problem was structural, not personal.

Patricia Monture-Angus writes that

Understanding how patriarchy operates in Canada without understanding colonization is a meaningless endeavour from the perspective of Aboriginal people.

The Canadian state is the invisible male perpetrator who unlike Aboriginal men does *not* have a victim face. And at the feet of the state I can lay my anger to rest. Being able to name the state as my oppressor has allowed me to sit outside the personal cyclone of pain that once raged out of control in my life. [...] colonialism must be incorporated in feminist analysis. The women's movement has never taken as its *central* and long-term goal, the eradication of the legal oppression that is specific to Aboriginal women

(Patricia Monture-Angus, 1995. P175)

Even something like getting the vote, which is seen as a big victory of First Wave feminism, turns out to be a ruse of power that divides women along lines of race, class, and Indigeneity.

When we say that "women in Canada got the vote in 1918," to which women are we referring? It was not until 1963 that the right to vote was not restricted by race. The women who got the vote in 1918 were white women of the property-owning class.

Their advancement was based on the exclusion and oppression of other women.

Women in Québec did not get the vote until 1940. Chinese- and Indo-Canadians were denied the right to vote until 1947. Japanese-Canadians were finally allowed to vote a year later, in 1948.

Indigenous people did not get the vote in Canada until 1960. But the enfranchisement of Indigenous people was a strategy of the state to assimilate them into Canadian society, part of an agenda to divest them of their treaty rights as members of First Nations.

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Intersectionality is a way of taking into consideration all of the factors that together make up our political identities: our gender, our race and ethnicity, our class and status in society, our sexuality, our physical abilities, our age, our national status, and so on.

As we have seen, privileged white feminists misrepresented a politics that defended their specific interests as a politics acting on behalf of all women.

Intersectionality tries to make visible the multiple factors that structure our experiences of oppression, and against which we have to struggle.

Some of these factors we share as women, others we do not.

But what intersectionality attempts to do is to show how our experiences as women are interconnected. Often we are pitted against other women by patriarchal and racist systems of power.

For example, as we have seen, upper class white women negotiating the politics of housework in their heterosexual relationships are encouraged by the Canadian state to hire a domestic worker through the LCP.

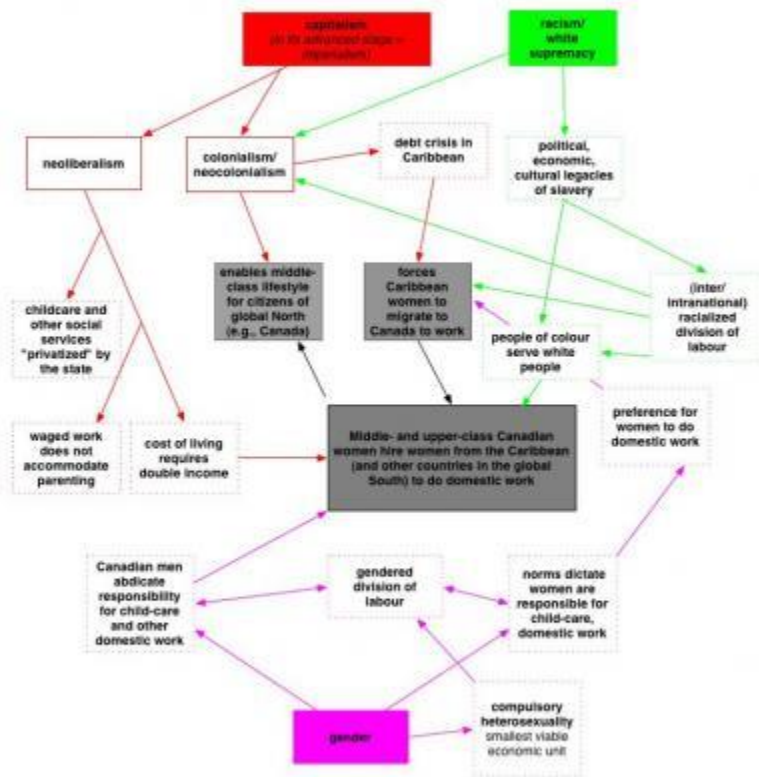
Intersectionality can help us understand how systems of power interlock – for instance, a legacy of colonialism and imperialism in the Philippines and in the Caribbean relate to the neoliberal policies which privatized and feminized care work in Canada.

If these seem unrelated, intersectionality shows us that they are not, and that they shape relationships among women (for instance, between a Canadian upper class woman and the migrant worker from the Philippines or the Caribbean whom she employs through the LCP).

Check out the diagram below, which shows the factors we'd have to consider in order to perform an integrative analysis of migrant domestic labour in Canada.



## Integrated Analysis: Migrant Domestic Labour in Canada



Source: Sherene Razack, "Your Place or Mine? Transnational Feminist Collaboration" in Agnes Calliste and George Sefa Dei, eds., with Margarita Aguiar, *Anti-Racist Feminism: Colour Race and Gender Studies*. Halifax: Fernwood, 2006. Pp.39-53

Created by Anna Anastathis, 2016

Intersectionality also helps us see the problem with what Elizabeth (“Betita”) Martinez has called the “Oppression Olympics”: that is, the idea that oppressions can be quantified and that some oppressions are worse than others. So, on this kind of view, the “most” oppressed person would “win” the “Oppression Olympics,” and take first place on top of the “Hierarchy of Oppressions” (see Elizabeth (“Betita”) Martinez, 1993.)

Martinez and others suggest this is counter-productive to organizing against oppression. For instance, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack have argued that “any theory, strategy or practice based [on the Oppression Olympics] will inevitably fail because it ignores the relationships among hierarchical systems” (see Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, 1998. P335).

Intersectionality doesn’t just highlight *differences* among women. It also makes visible what we have in common. More specifically, it reveals our common enemies: symbiotic systems of power relations (race, class, gender) that need each other in order to function.

What this means is that in order to destroy patriarchy, and eliminate sexism and heteronormativity from our society, we would also need to destroy white supremacy and colonialism (and eliminate racism) and capitalism and imperialism (and eliminate class exploitation).

While some of us are privileged by these power relations and others oppressed, an intersectional approach can show that the privileges we receive are part of a divide and conquer strategy that is meant to distract us from identifying who really holds power in our society.

Audre Lorde writes that many of us who have some kind of social privilege (from whiteness, from class, from gender, or from being citizens of an imperialist state in the Global North) are “seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power” (Audre Lorde, [1980] 1984. P118).

It is this notion that we could “share power” with the élite of our society that misleads some feminists into thinking that they can achieve their liberation on the backs of other women. And it is the real privileges that function as inducements and entrapments to join our oppressor in oppressing others, privileges that we get in virtue of our class position, of our whiteness, of our level of education, of our national citizenship, of our (hetero)sexuality, and so on.

But feminists who seek a total social transformation, who want society to look completely different from what it looks like now, shouldn’t let themselves be “seduced into joining the oppressor.”

Intersectionality is a strategy that can reveal the real connections between apparently unrelated experiences women have of oppression.



Audre Lorde suggests that it is our responsibility as feminists to come to see these connections. Only in this way can we come to understand that the true liberation of one oppressed group cannot happen without the liberation of all oppressed people.

Here is how Audre Lorde puts it:

I am a lesbian woman of Color whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Color whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you (Audre Lorde, [1980] 1984. Pp132-133).

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So, to sum up.

We all have intersectional identities that are shaped through systems of power relations, and through experiences of oppression.

If feminism is to be a truly liberatory politics seeking the freedom of all oppressed people, it has to recognize this important insight: that “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own” – that I am not free as long as any oppressed person remains chained.

Privileged white feminists involved in the feminist movements in US and Canada failed to realize this, and instead continually overgeneralized their own specific experience as the experience of all women.

They fell prey to “divide and conquer” strategies that distracted them from realizing what is the real source of their oppression, and how the privileges they are granted in virtue of their race, class, heterosexuality and national status, are based on the oppression of other women.

Intersectionality helps us to understand how gender, class, race, and other factors in our experience fit together. It helps us come up with better feminist politics that seek the emancipation of all people – not just an élite minority of privileged women.

It helps us understand that some problems we share as women and girls, and others we don't share. But what we all share as oppressed people is a common enemy: a shared oppressor.

Intersectional approaches to feminist theorizing and activism can help us overcome the "Oppression Olympics" problem and the problem of having to focus on one aspect of one's identity at the expense of ignoring another.

Intersectionality can help us understand feminism as a much broader project than it has been construed by privileged white feminists in the US and Canada.

It can show us that as feminists we need to be antiracists, we need to oppose colonialism (starting with internal colonialism in Canada and the US of First Nations), imperialism and corporate globalization, and to defend the rights of workers to determine the conditions of their labour.

As feminists, we need to imagine alternatives to capitalism for organizing how we produce things to meet needs in our society. We need to recognize that war and violent domination are the flip side of "business as usual," and that we will never see true peace until we see justice enacted in our society.

Intersectionality can show us the connections between the imperialist wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, the war on Indigenous people struggling for self-determination by the Canadian and US states, the war on women, waged here and elsewhere through gendered and racialized violence, poverty, and exploitation.

And it can help us create feminist politics that embody our aspirations for a completely different world.

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### ***Say What...?***

Having a "say what?" moment? Check out this glossary for a quick definition of a tricky technical term...

### **Glossary**

**capitalism** – an economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production. It is structurally characterized by the expropriation of the products of labour of the working class (or, "proletariat") by the capitalist or ruling class (or, "bourgeoisie") in exchange for wages. The working class produces "surplus value" (profit) for the capitalist class – also known as "capital". Capital has two tendencies: the tendency to expand into (or produce) new markets (through imperialism and colonization) and the

tendency to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands. As a result of the latter, capitalism is typically characterized by an extreme disparity (or “gap”) between the rich and the poor.

**class** – the relation of a group of people to the means of production. In capitalist political economies, there are two classes: proletariat, or working class, and bourgeoisie, or capitalist class. The latter (bourgeoisie) owns the means of production whereas the former (proletariat) does not.

**colonization** – a violent process through which one nation-state takes political and economic control over another nation-state or indigenous society, expropriates its resources, administrates or governs it locally, and actively populates the region with its own citizens.

**domination** – the exercise of power by one social group over another.

**exploitation** – strictly, the extraction of profit from waged labour. More generally used to refer to any relation in which one party or group benefits unfairly from the work or activities of another.

**heteronormativity** – the social enforcement of heterosexual relations to the occlusion of all other possibilities for sexual desire and expression.

**imperialism** – a global system of domination exercised through private property (capital), military power, and global institutions (such as the WTO or the IMF), through which wealth is drained from the labour and resources of people in the Global South to the systematic advantage of capital (i.e., the capitalist class) in the Global North. A nation-state is imperialist if its ruling class and state apparatuses perpetuate and systematically benefit from this system of structural global inequality.

**oppression** – the constellation of structural economic, political, and psycho-social relations that systematically confine or reduce the life-choices of a social group, often through presenting members of the oppressed social group with a set of “double binds”: that is, choices between equally problematic outcomes. [See also privilege]

**privilege** – unearned advantages which are conferred systematically to members of a social group, in virtue of their group-membership. [See also oppression]

**social group** – a collective of persons who are similarly located vis-à-vis another such collective in structural social relations of privilege and oppression; a group exists only in relation to at least one other group, and is characterized by a shared experience of privilege/oppression. Individuals are “always already” members of a social group and are constituted as such by their group membership.

**social relations** – patterned interaction between social groups (e.g., racism, class, and sexism).

**white supremacy** – a system of racialized power, articulated with a class system, that systematically confers privilege in some form to white people of all economic classes, genders, and sexualities.

**white settler state** – a term used to refer to contemporary colonial nation-states which have not been decolonized, but are still populated and controlled by the descendants of European colonists (and more recent white arrivals) and which exhibit racialized class relations typical of a white supremacist social formation (e.g., Canada, Australia).

**Source:** Excerpted from “Glossary” by Anna Carastathis and Anna Feigenbaum. Created in 2006 as part of the “Introduction to Women’s Studies” curriculum, Women’s Studies Program, McGill University.

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