STATE OF THE ART

There is no such thing as ‘women’s representation’: intersectionality and second-generation gender and politics scholarship

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Celis and Childs have called for a ‘second generation’ of feminist scholarship on representation that foregrounds intersectional heterogeneity and emphasises responsiveness to representatives beyond parliaments. We build on these important contributions, arguing that second-generation feminist scholarship and democratic design can make the greatest gains by operationalising intersectionality in close alignment with its origins in Black feminism and critical race theory. First, to foreground intersectional heterogeneity, we posit that feminist scholarship on representation must shift away from the overarching category ‘women’, exemplified in the popular operationalisation of intersectionality as ‘diversity among women’. We instead propose a margins-to-centre approach that centres the intersections of race, gender and other power structures. Second, we exemplify what this shift looks like in practice. We show how centring racially minoritised women and the intersecting structures that position them within political institutions transforms strategies to improve responsiveness to this intersectionally marginalised group.

Keywords intersectionality • representation • race • Black feminism • parliaments

Key messages

• Feminist research on representation should operationalise intersectionality in line with Black feminism.
• We should move away from the overarching category ‘women’ as a point of departure, as this risks reproducing inequality.
• Intersectional scholarship should centre intersectionally marginalised groups, both normatively and empirically.
• We exemplify the benefits of applying our approach to ‘intersectional institutions’ and feminist democratic design.
Introduction

Recent research on gender and politics has coalesced around themes of intersectionality, institutions and extra-parliamentary representatives. In this context, Celis and Childs (2020; 2023) have called for a ‘second generation’ of feminist scholarship on representation and associated democratic design. Their key proposals include foregrounding intersectional heterogeneity1 and emphasising responsiveness to representatives beyond parliaments. Both are crucial for the good representation of intersectionally marginalised groups, such as racially minoritised women. We build on these important contributions, arguing that second-generation feminist democratic design can make the greatest gains by operationalising intersectionality in close alignment with its origins in Black feminism and critical race theory.

First, to foreground intersectional heterogeneity, we posit that intersectional feminist scholarship on representation must shift away from the overarching category ‘women’ as its point of departure, exemplified in the popular operationalisation of intersectionality as ‘diversity among women’ (Christoffersen, 2021; Christoffersen and Emejulu, 2023). We instead propose a margins-to-centre approach that centres the intersections of race, gender and other power structures. This contrasts with ‘inclusion’, which positions ‘gender’ as the primary category or axis of analysis and subsequently the effects of heterogeneity within that category. We argue that treating race, gender and other power structures as mutually constitutive entails addressing the contingency of the salience of gender compared to other power structures and its qualitatively different effects in interaction with race (including whiteness).

Second, we exemplify what this shift looks like in practice: we apply our approach to political institutions and feminist democratic design, employing the notion of intersectional institutions. We show how centring racially minoritised women and the intersecting structures positioning them within parties, parliaments and the fourth estate shifts strategies to improve responsiveness to this intersectionally marginalised group.

We recognise that it is both controversial and not entirely novel to propose that feminist scholarship on representation does away with a focus on ‘women’ or ‘gender’ as the a priori primary foci of analysis. We offer, first, an articulation of these dynamics particular to scholarship and activism on feminist representation – which has arguably been somewhat resistant to such an analysis. Second, we exemplify the application of these arguments to democratic design. Young (1994) considered but ultimately rejected Black, postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques of ‘women’. More recently, Celis and Childs (2020: 128) aimed to bridge these divides by suggesting that ‘women’ in their diversity take more space, not less. Others have suggested shifting from ‘women’ to ‘gender equality’ (Harder, 2023). We take a different approach, instead drawing on diverse Black feminisms, adopting arguments that have long been made in the realm of intersectionality and public policy studies (see, for example,
Hankvisky and Jordan Zachary, 2019) and heeding Kimberlé Crenshaw and colleagues’ (2024: 4) most recent argument that there is a need to ‘reassert the theoretical basis of [intersectionality], to reattach it to a critical understanding of racism in society’.

We are aware that our suggestions create practical challenges given that translating scholarship into real-world democratic design and institutional change is itself a politically fraught endeavour in which framing matters and a degree of political expediency is difficult to avoid. Additionally, urging that second-generation scholarship devotes itself to groups at the crosshairs of intersecting power structures could challenge some of the foundational assumptions of first-generation gender and politics research. As a subfield that has historically been largely, though not exclusively, aligned with liberal feminism (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017), the incorporation of Black feminist conceptual frameworks creates potential for theoretical and ideological tensions that are rarely explicitly acknowledged. Yet, these tensions can be productive if they are unpacked and embraced. Theorists of race and politics have long argued that liberalism is racial, constructed by whiteness and with a European racial contract at its core (Mills, 1997; 2017; see also Crenshaw et al, 2024). We argue that if second-generation feminist scholarship on representation operationalises intersectionality in closer alignment with the rich contributions of Black feminism and critical race theory, greater representative gains can be made for all marginalised groups, including different groups of women and other marginalised genders.

Our claim is that replacing ‘women’ as a starting point with ‘intersectionally marginalised constituencies’ will reduce the risk of inadvertently reproducing power inequalities among groups defined first and foremost by single axes of identity, such as gender. Although we focus on gender here, our argument also extends to other forms of group representation that take a different axis of identity as their starting point. Practically, this means moving away from an operationalisation of intersectionality that centres the category ‘women’ and then considers diversity within that category, or, if we wish to study privileged groups, such as white women, naming this and considering race explicitly from the outset. Importantly, our proposed operationalisation of intersectionality insists that we refuse to leave whiteness, cisgenderism and ableism, among others, as undefined norms. It also demands that we critically interrogate the role of some actors within the group ‘women’ in actively denying the (good) representation of others, instead furthering the structures of inequality that marginalise women experiencing intersecting inequalities.

A second generation of feminist democratic design operationalising intersectionality in this way is less focused on ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘equality’ (Celis and Childs, 2020, 2023) and more engaged with principles of justice and ending domination, as articulated by Black feminists and critical race theorists. We argue that this shift is important because centring ‘diversity’ among women risks the implication that all differences are considered equal, including those of ideologies that further white supremacy, cisgenderism and other structures of inequality. In contrast, a core tenet of intersectionality is to centre the most marginalised (Crenshaw, 1989). We put this theorising to practice by offering strategies to increase responsiveness to extra-parliamentary representatives, with greater emphasis on their unique positioning vis-à-vis intersectional institutions. These structural analyses of the intersections of race, class and other systems of domination in addition to gender will reduce the risk of reproducing power dynamics among representatives within and beyond parliamentary chambers.
In the sections that follow, we briefly discuss some of the debates around the use of intersectionality theory within political science and the subfield of gender and politics. We then detail and exemplify our arguments for an operationalisation of intersectionality that decentres ‘women’ and ‘gender’ and centres intersectionally marginalised groups. Finally, we exemplify what this contributes to an intersectional analysis of how political institutions position extra-parliamentary representatives of these groups. In doing so, we aim to make a contribution, both theoretically and practically, in support of the broader aims of a second generation of feminist scholarship and democratic design.

A contested concept: intersectionality and research on representative politics

Historically, scholarship on representation has focused primarily on gender or race, but rarely both. Early exceptions include US studies of Black women’s representation (Prestage, 1977; Darcy and Hadley, 1988; Herrick and Welch, 1992; Gay and Tate, 1998), Latina and Chicana representation (Takash, 1993; Marquez, 1997) and Asian American women’s representation (Chu, 1989). The scarcity of this work and the continued marginalisation of racially minoritised women as subjects of political science inquiry resulted in repeated calls for the adoption of intersectional approaches to the study of representation (Smooth, 2006; 2011; Hancock, 2007; Alexander-Floyd, 2014). Subsequently, we have seen exponential growth in scholarship on the intersections of gender, race and a myriad of other systems of oppression, both in political science and elsewhere (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Although many of these developments have undoubtedly been positive, the popularisation of intersectionality has also sparked debates about how it has been used. Definitions of intersectionality drawing on Crenshaw (1989; 1991) are now very well rehearsed within gender and politics literature. There has, however, been considerably less engagement with the wider body of Black US feminism and critical race theory preceding Crenshaw and outside of the US. This includes the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977), hooks (1981), Hull et al (1982), King (1988) and Hill Collins (1990). Gender and representative politics scholarship typically engages even more rarely (if at all) with Black, Women of Colour and Afropean feminisms emerging from Europe (Mirza, 1997; 2003; Emejulu and Sobande, 2019).

The significance of this is that the concept of intersectionality has arguably become divorced from its normative focus not merely on including but also centring intersectionally marginalised groups, for example, in relation to the prominence of Crenshaw’s ‘intersection’ metaphor and the forgetting of her ‘basement’ metaphor (Carastathis, 2013; Itagaki, 2023). For Crenshaw (1989: 151), the basement:

contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked – feet standing on shoulders – with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling.

Intersectionality therefore invites us to normatively and analytically centre those ‘on the bottom’.
In addition, political science scholarship has often employed intersectionality in ways detached from a Black feminist definition of ‘success’. A definition more closely aligned with Black feminism differs substantially from diversity and inclusion within liberal representation, instead aiming for the more radical and far-reaching goal of ‘eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture’ (hooks, 1981: 194), including within democratic institutions. In this context, scholars have raised grave concerns regarding the re-marginalisation of minoritised women by scholarship that purports to take intersectional approaches (see, for example, Alexander-Floyd, 2012), the erasure of race from European scholarship on intersectionality (Lewis, 2013; Mügge et al, 2018) and the failures of decolonisation and the position of minoritised women within European political science more widely (Begum and Saini, 2019; Emejulu, 2019; Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks, 2020). Indeed, denying the significance of racism in Europe represents an expression of ‘white innocence’ that safeguards white privilege (Wekker, 2016). Ten years on from important arguments concerning intersectionality’s whitewashing (Bilge, 2013), which have been restated many times, we argue that these arguments cannot continue to be strategically ignored or misunderstood in feminist scholarship on representation.

Our aim is therefore to explore what second-generation feminist democratic design might look like if we attempt to operationalise intersectionality in greater alignment with the normative concerns of Black feminism and critical race theory, in particular, the pursuit of intersectional and racial justice. We advocate doing so by: (1) decentring ‘women’ and gender and centring intersectionally marginalised groups; and (2) applying structural intersectional analysis to the institutions that position these groups. Doing so reveals some of the often unarticulated tensions between traditional gender and politics approaches and the bodies of Black feminism and critical race theory that they draw from when employing the term ‘intersectionality’. Yet, articulating these tensions is itself revealing of the radical possibilities for second-generation feminist democratic design.

Decentring ‘women’ and centring ‘intersectionally marginalised groups’

Black and other feminists of colour have long argued that the category of ‘women’ is not neutral; indeed, it is ‘always already raced as white’ (Lewis, 2017: 117). In Europe, the solidification of gender as a social structure, and thus the meanings accorded to the categories of ‘women’ and ‘men’, was intimately bound up with colonialism and its foundational construction of meanings of racial difference (Lugones, 2007). A particular construction of vulnerable white femininity, built in contrast with racialised others, has been used as both evidence for white superiority and a reason for racial violence and genocide (Ware, 2015 [1992]). In the US, Spillers (1987) analysed the ‘ungendering’ of Black women in the context of racial slavery up to and including the present day, in what Sharpe (2014) has powerfully termed its ‘wake’: ‘This problematizing of gender places [the African American female] … out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject’ (Spillers, 1987: 80, emphasis in original). Ungendering refers to the ways that ‘vulnerable’ femininity has always been applied only to white women, while, in contrast, Black women have laboured in the same often deadly conditions as Black men. These differences continue to be observed in the conditions in which
many migrant and racially minoritised women across Europe work, compared with those of white women. Further, the reproductive capacities of white women to reproduce white nations are valued, while maternity services for Black women are characterised by a ‘systemic and historical pattern of racial abuse’ globally (UN, 2023). The important insight of ungendering – extended to the European context by Lewis (2017) and Em ejulu (2022), among others – is rarely integrated into feminist scholarship on representation. This is especially true in a European context that ‘is persistently silent on race and racism, which is always understood to be a problem that exists elsewhere’ (Emejulu and Bassel, 2021: 4). Indeed, ‘racial Europeanization’ ‘concerns itself overwhelmingly with racial avoidance’ (Goldberg, 2006: 343). Europe is characterised by ‘invisible’ racialisation: the coexistence of the construction of non-whiteness as non-Europeaness with ‘a discourse of colorblindness that claims not to “see” racialized difference’ (El-Tayeb, 2011: 24). Growing contributions of Black feminist researchers and colleagues documenting the experiences of and resistance to racism and anti-Blackness among racially minoritised women in Europe (see, for example, Wekker, 2016; Em ejulu and Sobande, 2019; Bassel and Emejulu, forthcoming) mean that denying the significance of race in Europe is no longer empirically tenable.

Despite this scholarship, such discourses, entwined with the racial discourse of whiteness, remain powerful in both European politics and political science, including gender and politics scholarship. This is typically observed as an absence of, or very limited engagement with, race, forms of racism and white supremacy. Examples include the continued refusal of many European states to collect data on race, hindering even the most basic analyses of political representation, as well as scholars’ choices to engage with ‘ethnicity’ or ‘migration background’ rather than the process of racialisation, which also maintains whiteness. These choices serve to make ‘the terms of recognition and response’ to structural racism in Europe ‘unavailable’ (Goldberg, 2006: 339).

As part of the process of racially minoritised women’s exclusion from the category ‘women’, white women parliamentarians (including those advocating for gender equality) have been shown to have actively constructed the category in their own image (Christoffersen, 2024a). Contemporary examples of this process also abound within the rhetoric of female right-wing populist anti-gender politicians in Europe (see, among others, Farris, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018; Bader and Mottier, 2020). Thus, the category of ‘women’ fails to encompass all ‘women’, even when it is qualified with references to diversity: ‘once you understand that embedded in the idea of “woman” are the normative values of white, bourgeois cisheteronormativity, then the entire fiction of “woman” is exposed’ (Christoffersen and Emejulu, 2023: 635). Therefore, despite best intentions, the term remains problematic as a starting point for gender and politics scholarship. We suggest instead that ‘which women’ is specified from the outset given that both ‘women’ and ‘diversity among women’ (often inadvertently) centre white and otherwise intersectionally privileged women.

Would we make the same arguments about scholarship starting with race or racialised minorities? It is important to note that not all categories are equivalent. Indeed, they have different, contingent contexts and ontologies (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and other Black feminist intersectionality theorists caution against a singular use of the category of race that implicitly centres male experience. However, this does not necessarily entail identical arguments regarding
‘race’ or ‘gender’ as points of scholarly departure. This is precisely because the
category of ‘women’ has a long and specific history of racialisation, embeddedness
in colonisation and white supremacy (Spillers, 1987; Lugones, 2007; Ware, 2015
[1992]), as well as resistance to intersectionality, especially in Europe (see, for
example, Christoffersen, 2024a).

Furthermore, in arguing that categories need not be destroyed or abandoned but
rather destabilised, Cathy Cohen (2005 [1997]: 45, emphasis added) notes that this
‘requires building a political analysis and political strategies around the most marginal
members of our society…. Most often, this will mean rooting our struggle in, and
addressing the needs of, communities of color.’ We concur and suggest that this
holds true empirically in a European context, which is particularly resistant to such
an analysis (Emejulu and Bassel, 2021). We therefore support Cohen’s (2005 [1997]:
47, emphasis added) call for a ‘reconceptualization of the politics of marginal groups
[that] allows us not only to privilege the specific lived experience of distinct communities, but
also to search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage
broader political struggles’. We argue that these insights can be applied in European
gender and politics scholarship through decentring women and the presumed salience
of gender. While we do not suggest the abandonment of gender altogether, we do
argue that gender is always shaped by and, in turn, shapes other categories and so
needs to always be considered and employed in that context. Still, many others have
studied particular groups of intersectionally marginalised women positioned by
intersecting structures of power, including gender (see, for example, Tormos-Aponte

Operationalisations of intersectionality that begin from the category ‘women’ and
investigate heterogeneity within this category have been shown to be additive ones
that fail to account for the co-constitutive nature of categories and structures. This
is because gender is already assumed to be the most important marker of inequality
(Christoffersen, 2021; Christoffersen and Emejulu, 2023). In contrast, as has been
established in the literature on intersectionality and public policy, ‘the importance
of any category or structure … cannot be predetermined; the categories and their
importance must be discovered in the process of investigation’ (Hankivsky and Jordan-
Zachery, 2019: 7). When inequality structures, including but not limited to sexism
and racism, are conceived not as additive but as mutually constitutive and always
interlocking, this has three effects. First, we understand that their qualities change
in interaction with other structures and, therefore, that they do not have concrete
historical meaning outside of those relationships (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Second,
the relative salience of structures is contingent; thus, the salience of gender cannot
be assumed. Thus, in line with Hancock (2007: 251), we note that: (1) categories
and their interactions are fluid and dynamic rather than rigid and static; and (2)
we must consider intersectionality at the level of both individuals and institutions.
Third, we explicitly acknowledge that structures produce not only oppression but
also privilege in their shifting relationships with others. For example, in the field
of political representation, not only do both white and certain racially minoritised
women benefit from white supremacy, but they have also actively sought to maintain
racial privileges by policing the borders of ‘womanhood’ and upholding the distinction
between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ minority ethnic groups through processes of ‘post-racial
gatekeeping’ (Saini et al, 2023). It is not therefore self-evident that ‘women’s’ or ‘diverse
women’s’ inclusion should be the priority of efforts towards equitable representation.
Gender as a social marker is always interlocking with others that change its qualities, meaning that neither ‘women’ nor ‘men’ are an inherently oppressed group. Gender is also not a binary category, as the burgeoning political scholarship on non-binary gender shows (see, for example, Solevid et al, 2021).

Additive operationalisations of intersectionality that begin from the premise that all ‘women’ are oppressed struggle theoretically and practically to accommodate the insight that interlocking structures of inequality produce both penalty and privilege and that women can therefore be privileged, both in relation to other women and gender-diverse people and in relation to some men in shifting and context-dependent ways. In short, employing intersectionality in alignment with Black feminist theory requires us to shift away from the premise that all women are oppressed and some intersectionally marginalised ones are ‘even more’ oppressed. Instead, an intersectional approach highlights the ways that privilege and oppression coexist simultaneously, shift according to context and characterise relationships among women as much as between women, gender-diverse people and men. In turn, this challenges both empirical scholarship and democratic design to face head-on the uncomfortable reality that some women oppress others.

A further implication of the mutually constitutive theorisation of intersectionality is that foregrounding intersectionality neither starts with nor stops at women. It is instead consistently concerned with all inequality structures and markers, as these are always interlocking and mutually constitutive. Therefore, social groups like ‘women’ always overlap with others, including racially minoritised people, low-income and/or working-class people, LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer and Intersex) people, disabled people, and migrants. As a result, research and theory that focuses on women or particular groups of women or gender cannot be taken to be self-evidently justified.

A range of feminist literature concerning social movements, particularly in the North American context, is instructive for gender and politics scholarship in this respect. This research refrains from taking ‘women’ or gender as a starting point and advances intersectional approaches through the study of contingent and nuanced intersections of structures of power in interplay with identities (see, for example, Tungohan, 2015; Terriquez et al, 2018; Einwohner et al, 2021). Such broadening of research on intersectionality and social movements has been called for to advance scholarship focusing on gender (Irvine et al, 2019). In a classic early example, Cathy Cohen (2005 [1997]) takes a Black queer political and theoretical approach to examine how structures of heterosexism and racism intersect, such that not all ‘straight’ people across race, class and gender are included in the (racialised and classed) heteronormative, at the same time as there remains privilege in being heterosexual. Cohen (2005 [1997]: 45; see also Cohen, 2019) reflects upon the potential of queer politics, calling for the ‘destabilization and not the destruction or abandonment of identity categories…. Instead, I would suggest that it is the multiplicity and interconnectedness of our identities that provide the most promising avenue for the destabilization and radical politicalization of these same categories.’ Cohen (2005; 2019; see also Puar, 2007) refers to categories pertaining to sexuality and the ability of ‘queer’ to disrupt these at the same time as it may have solidified into one. Similarly, while we advocate decentring the category ‘women’ as the point of departure, we do not reject it as a category altogether. Scholarship that employs ‘women’ as a category is, however, invited to name whiteness and offer a clear rationale for what groups and structures are not considered. Centring intersectionally marginalised groups
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in feminist scholarship therefore requires relinquishing the category of ‘women’ as the de facto point of departure and the presumed salience of gender among other markers of inequality.

In contrast to ‘including’ all women, or being included in the category of ‘women’, Black feminists have long argued for a political goal very different from liberal inclusion. Similarly to Cohen, Black feminist theory invites us to centre the interests of intersectionally marginalised groups in a transformative journey towards ending domination. To return to Spillers (1987: 80, emphasis in original): ‘In [making a place for the African American female social subject], we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject.’ The principle of ‘foregrounding intersectionality’ therefore invites us not only to centre intersectionally marginalised groups but also to engage in greater detail with theorising from the intersectional margins. This entails acknowledging the epistemological and ideological tensions between the aims of the liberal inclusion of ‘all’/’diverse’ women (formulated from the perspective of relative privilege, or, in Crenshaw’s terms, those at the top of the basement whose heads ‘brush up against the ceiling’) and the political goals of radical insurgency and ending domination (formulated from the perspective of exclusion from the category ‘women’ and, indeed, ‘human’ [Wynter, 2003; Emejulu, 2022]). Engagement with intersectionality on its own terms therefore upends, and not merely modifies, dominant approaches to both feminist research and democratic design. Thus, if we operationalise intersectionality in alignment with its roots in Black feminism, the (liberal) feminist principle of inclusiveness is replaced by centring marginality, both normatively and analytically.

Indeed, a core tenet of intersectionality, as elaborated by the oft-cited Crenshaw (1989: 16, emphasis added), is to centre, not include, the most marginalised: ‘[i]f … efforts … began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit’. Centring the ‘most disadvantaged’ contrasts sharply to ‘including’ ‘diverse’ women. The latter risks the implication that all differences among women are considered equal, including those of ideologies that further white supremacy, cisgenderism and other structures of inequality. An inclusion approach leaves us unable to normatively or theoretically distinguish between the perspectives, needs and interests of those women on either side of structures like race and class. An intersectional approach grounded in Black feminist theory requires that we give primacy to the perspectives of (for example, but not limited to) the overlapping groups of disabled women, racially minoritised women, trans women and low-income/working-class women. We are careful not to give false equivalency to the perspectives of these groups compared to those who enjoy relative privilege, nor to the interests and perspectives of those who actively oppress other groups of women, for example, anti-trans activists intent on rendering other women’s lives unliveable and unknowable, or women committed to white supremacy and the degradation of racialised minorities and migrants. A margins-to-centre approach does not, by its very nature, treat these ideologically heterogeneous perspectives equally.

Gender and politics scholarship has long struggled with quandaries of ‘picking a side’ when it comes to improving women’s representation while simultaneously recognising ideological heterogeneity (see, for example, Celis and Childs, 2012). However, an intersectional approach is also in tension with ideological ambivalence: it insists that
we side not with ‘women’ or ‘feminism’ but with the most marginalised. Without this commitment, the normative project of ending domination due to intersecting power structures is not possible. We cannot ‘include’ intersectionally marginalised groups if we treat their claims as equivalent to those of their oppressors, which include other women. Therefore, when considering the competing claims of what Celis and Childs (2020, 2023) term ‘affected representatives of women’ (ARW), we advocate that intersectional feminist democratic design must centre the perspectives of those most marginalised.

What does it mean, then, to centre the most intersectionally marginalised, beyond theoretical engagement and the reconfiguring of political goals? First, centring intersectional marginality entails acknowledging that this category is contingent on time, place and the policy issue in question. In considering an intersectionally marginalised group, we begin with an inductive approach to assess which structures of inequality are salient in relation to the particular case (see Townsend-Bell, 2011) while recognising that the group always overlaps with infinite others. For example, Mirza and Meeto (2018) use this approach to show the ways in which working-class Muslim schoolgirls in the UK are positioned not only by gender, religion, race, sexuality and class but also by neoliberalism and post-feminist discourses of empowerment. Second, learning from intersectionality about the simultaneity of privilege and oppression highlights the agency of those who are marginalised, who are organised and advocating for their own needs and interests outside of parliaments and who possess dynamic and diverging identities and political orientations (see, for example, Emujulu and Sobande, 2019; Christoffersen, 2021; Emujulu and Bassel, 2021; 2023). We are clear that analysis must attend to the particularities of specific institutional contexts, which may shift over time. We explore responsiveness to these groups in detail in the next section.

Third, centring the intersections of race, gender and other power structures in empirical scholarship and democratic design upends ideas of group representation in general (see Smooth, 2011; Mügge and Erzeel, 2016; Severs et al, 2016; Celis and Mügge, 2018). Practically, if we begin by positing an intersectionally marginalised group, such as racially minoritised women, what or who the group is comprised of must remain an open question to avoid assuming the salience of certain structures while simultaneously failing to account for others, as well as reifying existing categorisations (Junn and Brown, 2008). For example, Siow (2023a; 2023b) analyses the constitutive and substantive representation of ‘minoritised women’ in the UK Parliament by expanding the traditional and problematic British moniker ‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic’ to include trafficked women and Eastern European women racialised as other. She acknowledges that who is racially minoritised and how is not consistent over time or space, and the process of racialisation interacts with a wide range of other structures. Operationalising intersectionality in alignment with Black feminist theory means acknowledging conflicting interests within groups, even within intersectionally marginalised groups (see, for example, Saini et al, 2023), as well as disagreement on what common interests are (Tungohan, 2015; Irvine et al, 2019). We concur with Bedolla (2007: 233) that it is important to focus on the ‘heterogeneity of privilege with marginalised groups’.

Centring intersectionally marginalised groups rather than ‘women’ or ‘gender’ has the potential to challenge some of the most foundational assumptions of gender and politics scholarship. For instance, the relationship between descriptive and substantive
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representation has been a defining feature of ‘first-generation’ research. Yet, if we centre the experiences of women with precarious citizenship, for example, we can no longer posit the notion that descriptive representation is even possible. Women who lack citizenship and recourse to public funds are excluded from forms of political participation and representation in ways that both first-generation scholarship and approaches that operationalise intersectionality as ‘diversity among women’ are not theoretically equipped to address. As such, Celis and Childs (2020, 2023) make an important intervention in highlighting the necessity of feminist democratic design that responds to extra-parliamentary representatives of marginalised groups, which they term ‘affected representatives of women’. We revise this to ‘affected representatives’ (AR), removing the primacy of gender, and reassert the need for groups representing marginalised women to be led by and for those they represent (Christoffersen, 2021). We now show practically how centring intersectionally marginalised groups and their position within intersectional institutions shifts strategies to increase responsiveness to ARs, in this case, racially minoritised women.

Exemplifying what this looks like in practice: intersectional institutions

How does an intersectional approach that does not prioritise gender as a starting point and does consider intersecting structures within political institutions shift our thinking? What does thinking through responsiveness to ARs of intersectionally marginalised groups look like in practice? We illustrate this by returning to the proposals set out by Celis and Childs (2020, 2023) and building upon their approach with a revised operationalisation of intersectionality that centres racially minoritised women rather than considering ‘diversity among women’. We centre racially minoritised women as an illustrative case of an intersectionally marginalised group, following the approach of scholars like Erica Townsend-Bell (2011), who provides an important discussion of identifying relevance (identified based on which categories are of analytic importance, contextual to time and place, and those categories that activists consider relevant) in the context of intersectional praxis in social movements. Here, we extend this work to consider the relationship between extra-parliamentary actors and the parliamentary setting, recalling the need to decentre women and name whiteness in the process of identifying relevance. In doing so, we also build upon Christoffersen (2023: 7), who notes:

the category of most marginalised is a contingent one, dependent on time and place as well as the policy issue in question, and can be determined based on available evidence. This category is therefore a fluid one, and as evidence overwhelmingly suggests, will be represented by a group experiencing intersecting inequalities … identifying the most marginalised involves conceptualising social groups as always-intersecting and overlapping, such that one group is related to all others.

Returning to centring racially minoritised women, first, by starting with ARs rather than ARWs, we pay attention to the dual meaning of ‘affected’ highlighted by Celis and Childs (2020: 126–7; see also Celis and Childs, 2023: 8): not only does this draw attention to ‘heterogeneous experiences’; it also ‘speaks to the importance of the
affective and symbolic in practice’. Thinking about this from the starting point of an intersectionally marginalised group, such as racially minoritised women, a move from ARWs to simply ARs removes the assumption or requirement that the group itself affectively identifies or symbolically represents itself primarily in relation to gender, race or any other single axis of identity. These groups may also not self-define as ‘feminist’ because of exclusion and alienation from feminist and other activist spaces (Emejulu and Bassel, 2023). Racially minoritised women, in addition to their interests being subsumed and marginalised by liberal white feminism (see, among others, hooks, 1981; Sapiro, 1984; Phipps, 2020), also face stereotyping, assumptions and political contests around allegiances with facets of their identity (Gay and Tate, 1998; Collins, 2004; Settles, 2006; Jordan–Zachery, 2007). Importantly, others have observed that racially minoritised women can themselves mobilise additive and hierarchical understandings of oppression (Ward, 2004). As such, ARs have an important role in constituting both their own identities and claims on their behalf in a relationship that is ‘equal of sorts’ with elected representatives (Celis and Childs, 2020: 127).

Next comes the question of how to identify relevant ARs. Celis and Childs (2020: 132) rightly highlight the need for members of parliament (MPs) to actively reach out to extra-parliamentary actors, suggesting ‘societal claims-makers for women, including … formal and informal political party and women’s organizations, gender experts such as femocrats, academics, public intellectuals, and journalists, and the variety of women’s social media actors’, are sites for the identification of ARs. Yet, a very brief structural analysis of these sites as raced-gendered intersectional institutions in the UK context reveals several dangers worthy of consideration: political parties limit access to women and minorities who go beyond ‘acceptable difference’ (Durose et al, 2012); political party organisations focusing on gender have marginalised the concerns of minoritised women (Hussain, 2021); gender experts in the public sphere are by no means experts on race and are very rarely women of colour, with only 66 Black women professors across all academic disciplines in the UK at the time of writing (a continuously updated list is maintained at whenequality.org/100); and journalism remains hugely dominated by white men (Spilsbury, 2017; Tobit, 2020; Women in Journalism, 2020), and Black women face significant incentives to avoid rocking the boat in this context (McCall, 2020). Gal-Dem, the unique news organisation run by and for people of colour from marginalised genders, closed after eight years in 2023, stating the difficulties of ‘marrying our values … with profitability that was needed to sustain and reinvest in the business’ (Gal-Dem, 2023); while on social media, women of colour face specific forms of silencing (Amnesty International, 2017).

This bleak picture highlights why we advocate beginning with the identification of intersectionally marginalised ARs rather than attempting to include them in a search defined first by gender. Without doing so, there is a risk of engagement with a very small pool of ‘usual suspects’ from an already intersectionally marginalised group. Even intersectional organisations report demands of ‘over-representation’ and burnout (Christoffersen, 2024b). A search that starts with gender may also risk narrow engagement with those ARs who are most identified with ‘women’ and less identified with ‘minoritised women’ or ‘race’, that is, those least affected by the intersectional effects of gender and race (sometimes intersecting with, for example, certain forms of class privilege). Starting with affected representatives of minoritised women, therefore, means starting with civil society led by and for minoritised women, in particular, those furthest from the locus of power.
Those who are ‘easy-est to ignore’, to modify Celis and Childs (2020: 132) only slightly. This means not only identifying the ARs of those furthest from the locus of power within any intersectionally marginalised group but also engaging in the difficult, time-consuming and necessary task of developing relationships of trust and listening (Bassel, 2017) to lay foundations for an open dialogue. Practically, this may entail financial backing and capacity building to support these groups to become ‘representable constituencies’ (Celis and Childs, 2020: 132), as well as real openness to new conceptions of what is gendered and raced, and how. Furthermore, a margins-to-centre approach means giving primacy to these ARs over, for example, other groups of women who enjoy race and class privileges. To date, the adoption of intersectionality within feminist scholarship on representation has included little discussion of privileged women ceding, for example, race or class privilege in order to make space for minoritised women. This is despite the fact that this is a logical consequence of tackling racial inequalities among a group defined in the first instance by gender. Therefore, this must be a central commitment of second-generation feminist democratic design if it is to operationalise intersectionality in close alignment with Black feminism. Finally, prioritising civil society led by and for minoritised women furthest from the locus of power entails acknowledging that intersectional coalitions have their own internal power dynamics and disagreements (Luna, 2016), thus allowing for new problems to emerge.

Having identified the ARs of an intersectionally marginalised group (in this example, racially minoritised women), focused on those furthest from the locus of power, and supported them practically, financially and perhaps affectively, we then need to consider the landscape of intersectional institutions within which ARs and MPs engage with one another. Feminist institutionalist and ethnographic approaches within gender and politics scholarship have advanced our knowledge of the ways in which political institutions are subtly and not-so-subtly gendered (Acker, 1992; Krook and Mackay, 2010; Mackay et al, 2010; Crewe, 2017; Erikson and Josefsson, 2020; Miller, 2021a; 2021b). Meanwhile, recent analysis of race and the European Parliament shows the ways in which the institution is structured by normative whiteness and racism but places less focus on its intersection with other structures in this context (Kantola et al, 2023). This scholarship has been closely tied to recommendations for institutional change that aim to improve both the workplace experiences of political representatives and the opportunities for substantive representation (Childs, 2016; Smith, 2021). However, while these examples of scholar activism do attend to multiple structures, intersectionality is operationalised so that gender remains the primary focus. Therefore, recommendations risk catering best to those ‘at the top of the basement’.

We must therefore draw on and further contribute to the structural intersectional analysis of parliaments as institutions, in line with the contributions of Hawkesworth (2003) and Brown (2014) in the US. Furthermore, since parliaments do not operate in a vacuum – especially where responsiveness to ARs is concerned – the intersectional analysis of political institutions within and beyond parliaments (campaigns, parties, the media and civil society coalitions) is also necessary for second-generation democratic design to succeed in its aims (see, for example, Krook and Nugent, 2016; Ward, 2017; Einwohner et al, 2021; Hussain, 2021).

Celis and Childs (2020: 127, 129, emphasis in original) wisely anticipate ‘institutional and individual resistance to any redistribution of power’ and therefore attempt to
create ‘a gendered economy of representative claims within our parliaments’. They recommend a variety of strategies to incentivise elected representatives to engage in good faith with ARs through moments of advocacy, deliberation and accountability (Celis and Childs, 2023: 7). These include the requirement that all representatives engage in account giving (Celis and Childs, 2020: 143–6). Thus, they rightly insist that the responsibility for the good representation of marginalised groups lies not only with descriptive representatives (which for many of the most marginalised, there may be none, or none possible). Furthermore, they propose that elected representatives do so in public, not only in the presence of ARs themselves (whose status is elevated by their formalised position as such) but also under the scrutiny of the media. The intention is that this visibility ‘creates the condition for citizens to make autonomous, considered, reflective, and robust judgements’ (Celis and Childs, 2020: 149) about the issues at hand and subsequently hold elected representatives to account.

If we consider this moment in the context of racially minoritised women, and those furthest from the locus of power in particular, a variety of dangers become apparent. Perhaps the most obvious are those most easily solved: the capacity to convince a wider public based on what is constructed as ‘eloquence’ and ‘reliable’ evidence, confident public speaking, and access to data (especially on race in the European context) could – at least theoretically – be levelled with the right financial and other resources. With a genuine commitment to doing so, the ability of intersectionally marginalised groups to represent themselves on more equal terms with elected representatives in this sense becomes feasible and would also have positive implications for civil society led by and for intersectionally marginalised groups more widely.

The greater danger inherent in the process of public account giving, which assumes media scrutiny as a resource to improve elected representatives’ engagement with and responsiveness to ARs, is the discursive construction of intersectionally marginalised groups more widely. While white, bourgeois, cis ‘woman’ is in many cases unequal in relation to white, bourgeois, cis ‘man’ on account of her gender, contemporary discursive norms of gender equality render her claims possible in this discursive landscape. In contrast, racially minoritised women are constructed, at best, as ‘victims of honour crime, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM)’ and, at worst, as ‘maternity tourists’ and ‘jihadi brides’ (Jackson, 2022; Siow, 2023a). and trans communities are consistently misrepresented (Humphrey, 2016). This is not to suggest that it is simply impossible for racially minoritised women to be well represented. Recent attention to Black women’s experiences of maternity care in the UK, characterised by systemic racism that ‘ungenders’ and dehumanises Black women, is a good example (see, for example, Women and Equalities Committee, 2023). However, an intersectional approach that centres minoritised women is much more ambivalent about the power of national media to scrutinise responsiveness to and the good representation of intersectionally marginalised groups.

What is offered here is an illustrative sketch of how an approach that centres intersectionally marginalised groups may shift the analysis and identification of and support to ARs. There is much work to be done, however, in fleshing out the details of how to improve the processes and conditions of consultation, dialogue, deliberation, policy, scrutiny and accountability between elected representatives and the ARs of intersectionally marginalised groups. There are especially pressing dilemmas concerning the racial and gendered nature of the public sphere and the press in particular, which skew favour away from the interests of intersectionally marginalised
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groups – often to the point of incentivising their denigration. While judicial review also plays an important role – recently exemplified in relation to the UK government’s plans to flout international law by sending asylum seekers to Rwanda – the courts are also raced and gendered institutions, and there is precious little space for intersectional claims making within equalities legislation. This suggests that to design incentives to make it desirable (or even possible) for elected representatives to respond to and represent the interests of the ARs of intersectionally marginalised groups, we need serious consideration of innovative mechanisms beyond the traditional fourth estate, committees and judicial review. One avenue for inspiration in the design of relevant processes and institutional architecture may be the burgeoning literature on the ‘meaningful participation’ of marginalised civil society in international contexts, in particular, its focus on grounding policy in the insights of civil society representatives themselves (see, for example, Harley and Hobbs, 2020; McMillan et al, 2020). An intersectional approach to designing for responsiveness demands that we re-imagine democratic institutions in even more creative and radical ways.

Conclusions

Attention to intersectionality in second-generation feminist scholarship on representation is to be welcomed, yet it remains important to interrogate how intersectionality is understood and operationalised (Christoffersen, 2021). We recognise that attention to intersectionality is not new but that important studies of the intersections of gender, race and political representation from the 1970s onwards have had limited recognition until recently. Furthermore, debates persist regarding how intersectionality is used.

We suggest that second-generation scholarship can make the greatest advances by operationalising intersectionality in line with its normative focus on centring intersectionally marginalised groups and engaging deeply with the racism and white supremacy that structure Europe and European political institutions (Goldberg, 2006; Wekker, 2016). We have argued that operationalising intersectionality in alignment with its theoretical and political foundations upends existing dominant liberal approaches that foreground diversity and inclusion to the exclusion of justice. To achieve this, we argue that it is necessary to: (1) decentre ‘women’ and gender and centre intersectionally marginalised groups; and (2) apply structural intersectional analysis to the institutions that position these groups.

We have advocated for a shift from foregrounding intersectional heterogeneity among women towards centring intersecting power structures that position the most marginalised genders in both empirical scholarship and democratic design. The salience of gender as a social marker thus becomes an open empirical question, and it is always in interaction with other structures, including race. By specifying and interrogating whiteness, cisgender heteronormativity, ableism and other structures, we can avoid reproducing them as normative. Operationalising intersectionality entails prioritising the most marginalised, in contrast to seeking to include ‘everyone’. There is a specific danger in the category ‘women’ given its distinct genealogy. Therefore, we argue that by centring intersectionally marginalised groups as our point of departure, we have a greater chance of benefiting all marginalised genders (with the exception of those that are oppressive, for example, by reinforcing class, race, cisgender or other privileges) than if we start with ‘women’ and then consider
intersectional claims subsequent and thus subordinate to that category. However, intersectionally marginalised groups are not and should not be expected to speak with one voice. Just as Childs and Krook (2006) caution against the elision of women’s bodies and feminist minds, minoritised women do not equally advocate for intersectional justice. However, a civil society led by and for intersectionally marginalised groups campaigning against the intersectional effects of gendered and racial inequalities is committed to intersectional justice. This speaks to the more political aspects of intersectionality as an approach. Intersectionality theory speaks with some specificity in terms of intersectional justice and resolves the dilemmas of ‘picking a side’ encountered by feminist scholarship on representation. Intersectionality as a political project entails representing the interests of those who are most marginalised over those aligned with whiteness, patriarchy and class privilege – even if they are themselves intersectionally marginalised women. This aspect of intersectionality is: (1) often divorced from other aspects in its operationalisation within political science; and (2) arguably to some degree in tension with the inherent racial inequalities of liberal democracy and liberal feminism. This is both the challenge and the promise of incorporating intersectional approaches into feminist democratic representation.

We have illustrated our arguments by offering a brief intersectional institutionalist analysis, expanding upon Celis and Childs’ (2020, 2023) important theoretical and design work on responsiveness. In doing so, we have considered what responsiveness to extra-parliamentary representatives of intersectionally marginalised genders might look like and the possibilities for a creative reimagining of democratic institutions. We have aimed to propel a new generation of feminist political scholarship that, by interrogating the intersecting power structures most relevant to understanding any given political problem in context and critically examining the role of female political actors in reproducing material and discursive inequities functioning to deny the good representation of others, truly centres intersectionality and thus has the potential to make greater representative gains for all marginalised groups.

Note
1 Celis and Childs also focus on ideological heterogeneity. This is an essential part of both feminist scholarship on representation and good democratic design. The recognition of ideological heterogeneity also challenges stereotypes around the ideological or partisan politics of marginalised groups, as well as ideas about what constitutes ‘women’s’ or ‘minority’ interests. We do not address this in detail here, however, because we are focused squarely on power structures (such as gender, race and class) rather than ideological or partisan positions. We would also argue that the distinction between intersectional heterogeneity, on the one hand, and ideological heterogeneity, on the other, is a useful one; we should be careful not to frame the two as equivalent. This is because the task of attending to each of these forms of heterogeneity is quite different. Consideration of intersectional heterogeneity demands an analysis of structural power relations and their mutually co-constitutive relationships. The same cannot be said (at least to the same degree) for ideological or partisan heterogeneity.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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