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Invoking intersectionality: discursive mobilisations in feminism of the radical left

ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years the concept of intersectionality has become increasingly popular in feminist activism. Yet, how intersectionality is used within grassroots movements remains understudied. This article explores intersectionality in feminism within the radical left using a case study of the 2014 Scottish independence movement. The article draws on analysis of 37 semi-structured interviews carried out during the referendum campaign of 2014. Building on black feminist critiques, I highlight that intersectionality is taken up in ways that reproduce rather than tackle hegemonic norms of gender identity, race, class and age. I trace a disjuncture between interviewee claims to be intersectional and simultaneous perceptions of multi-dimensional marginalisations. I explore interviewee discussion of trans-inclusion as illustrative of how axes of intersectionality can be mobilised in ways that sustain hegemonic norms. Interviewees tended to legitimise their claims to intersectionality through invoking the trope of the 'TERF' – trans-exclusionary radical feminist – as a symbol of a selectively defined second-wave feminism elided with radical feminism. This invocation paradoxically reproduced marginalisations of race, class and even gender identity itself.

Key words: Feminism, intersectionality, Scotland, trans, TERF, social movements

Introduction

‘I’m fully into intersectionality, we did overlook stuff in the 80s that we shouldn’t have’.

(Sandra, forties)

‘You know there’re different types of feminism as well and there was like older feminists who, I think they’re called TERFs, and then there’s a younger group who love all things

queer and trans issues’. (Zainab, twenties)

Over the past ten years the concept of intersectionality has become increasingly popular in feminist and radical left activism in Britain (Munro, [2013](#)). However, some feminists have cautioned that intersectionality is often taken up in academia in ways that sustain rather than tackle hegemonic whiteness (Bilge, [2013](#); Collins & Bilge, [2016](#)). Additionally, debate around intersectionality is sometimes understood by the media and feminists themselves in generational terms, with intersectionality animating ‘young’ feminists which ‘older’ feminists are said to have overlooked (Munro, [2013](#)). Trans-inclusion has taken particular prominence as an axis of intersectionality with moves to allow people to self-identify their gender in many countries accompanied by a highly publicised conflict around trans-inclusion within feminism (Miles, [2018](#)). Yet, how intersectionality is taken up in grassroots feminist movements, as well as how far such movements effectively challenge hegemonic norms of gender identity, race, class or age, remains understudied. This article examines the extent to which feminism in the radical left builds an intersectional movement through a case study of the radical left of the Scottish independence campaign 2014. I highlight that interviewees simultaneously claimed to be intersectional and perceived their movement to be marked by lines of marginalisation. I argue that interviewee invocation of the TERF – trans-exclusive radical feminist – is illustrative of how

certain discursive mobilisations of axes of intersectionality undermine its challenge to hegemonic norms. Thus, in mobilising the TERF interviewees often framed trans-inclusion as a generationally linked identity which operated to mask ongoing marginalisations, even of gender identity itself, within the contemporary movement.

This article draws on 37 interviews with pro-independence feminists on the radical left in Scotland. The pro-independence referendum campaign was a left nationalist movement¹ given that it advocated, albeit not without ambiguity, for social justice (Della Porta & O'Connor, 2017). The movement also contained a sizable radical left² organised primarily around the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) (Della Porta & O'Connor, 2017). As RIC explicitly opposed nationalism and appealed for independence on anti-austerity grounds (Morrison, 2018), the case is taken as an example of radical organising rather than independence politics per se.³ The Scottish left has traditionally provided a platform for, but also disciplined, feminism. While Scotland remains overwhelmingly white⁴ and Scottish feminism had a predominantly white historical character, it was always subject to Scottish black feminist critique (Arshad & McCrum, 1989). Nonetheless, the radical left could be understood as a 'most-likely' case to explore intersectionality given that a central claim of radical left feminisms, such as socialist or anarchist, is that they incorporate analysis of class and other categories more profoundly than liberal feminisms (Littler et al., 2015).

This article is organised as follows: the first section discusses the existing literature on the ways intersectionality can be taken up to sustain rather than tackle hegemonic norms. The second section explores the research methodology, particularly my own position as an insider researcher. The third section then investigates interviewees' shifting perceptions of marginalisation within

feminist radicalism along lines of race, class and gender identity. The final section considers how particularly younger interviewees tended to legitimise their claims to intersectionality through invoking the trope of the TERF as a symbol of a selectively defined second-wave feminism elided with radical feminism (Evans, [2015](#); Mackay, [2015a](#)). While any age-based division is to some extent arbitrary, I define ‘younger’ as under 30 years of age in 2014 which broadly corresponds to the figure of the ‘millennial’ often associated with the post-2008 crisis upsurge in radical politics (Winch et al., [2016](#)).

Feminism, intersectionality and trans-inclusion

In order to provide a framework for the discussion of intersectionality within the case study, I begin with an examination of the principal ways in which intersectionality can be ‘undone’ in its very implementation (Bilge, [2013](#)). Black feminist critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw ([1991](#)) is widely acknowledged to have coined the term ‘intersectionality’ which highlights that oppressions are mutually constituted. Since its inception intersectionality has become increasingly influential, its invocation so widespread that Davis ([2008](#)) notes the term could be seen as something of a buzzword. Davis argues that intersectionality is ambiguous and has been applied in a variety of ways, which should be seen as a sign of the concept’s success. However, recently, feminist scholars have highlighted that intersectionality is frequently taken up in ways that obscure the very ongoing exclusionary practices it was originally intended to critique (Bilge, [2013](#); Collins & Bilge, [2016](#)). Therefore, it is important to consider not only if feminists claim to be intersectional, but how they use the concept.

Intersectionality is therefore complex, and there is some debate as to how it should be understood and applied. Some feminists argue that if intersectionality is used to analyse any intersection then

black women risk becoming re-marginalised as the intersection of white women with other identity categories is prioritised (Bilge, [2013](#)). Others argue that if intersectionality only analyses race and gender, there is a risk that categories such as sexuality or class are rendered marginal within feminist thought (Okolosie, [2014](#)). Theorists such as Nash ([2010](#)) also point to the ‘messiness’ of systems of oppression, highlighting that lived experience of complex intersections cannot be understood formulaically. This article follows Yuval-Davis ([2011](#)) in understanding intersectionality as a lens through which to study all social stratification. The benefit lies in its ability not to privilege or disadvantage any category, even if some structures may matter more in a given context, or the experiences of those categories are messy. Intersectionality is, therefore, an analytical tool for studying the complex workings of power (Collins & Bilge, [2016](#)).

Nonetheless, a key issue for the implementation of intersectionality historically has been the tendency for individuals to focus on oppressions that they themselves experience. In an influential paper, McIntosh ([1989](#)) discussed the ‘invisibility’ of privilege, as those who have privilege do not see the advantages they have in society simply by being born within a privileged category, such as white or male. Thus, the advantages that some individuals have, and their resultant dominant position in society, are often interpreted merely as the result of individual merit or hard work. As such, the structural, everyday challenges that oppressed groups face are rendered invisible. As Ahmed ([2012](#)) argues, in relation specifically to racial oppression, whiteness can be invisible for those who benefit from it, but it is a ‘brick wall’ for those who come up against it as a racialised ‘other’. This tendency to see, and therefore privilege, forms of oppression that we ourselves suffer is one reason behind the sometimes-superficial implementation of intersectionality.

A further way in which intersectionality can be ‘undone’ relates to a truncating and whitening of the historiography of intersectionality. While intersectionality within academia is commonly traced to Crenshaw ([1991](#)), feminists often stress that the awareness of complex, multiple, and inseparable identities has a far longer history in black and Third World women’s organising (Collins & Bilge, [2016](#)). Additionally, Lewis ([2013](#)) highlights that the linking of intersectional theory to the US context erases the history of black women’s theorising in Europe, as race is positioned as something that happened ‘elsewhere’. Emejulu and Sobande ([2019](#), p. 3) note that such linking can result in black women’s activism across Europe being ‘erased from or misrecognised in the European imagination’. Significantly, such scholarship does not merely correct an historical inaccuracy. Rather, it highlights how the marking of intersectionality as beginning with Crenshaw performs a political function by repeating a racist feminist construct whereby white feminists were the original and central historical agents, with black feminism only emerging in response to white feminism.

Moreover, Collins and Bilge ([2016](#)) argue that the shortening of the history of intersectionality can serve to sever its origins as a form of critical praxis, or relating to activist practices, as well as contributing to a tendency to refocus intersectional analysis away from the structural towards individual experience. Feminists of colour such as Mohanty ([2013](#)) highlight that women of the Global South have always organised as women against imperialism and capitalism. The roots of the term intersectionality are also commonly traced back to the Combahee River Collective statement (River, [1983](#)), a collective of socialist black lesbians, which emphasised the ‘simultaneous and interlocking’ nature of oppression. Thus, the core insights of intersectionality emerged from the experience and theoretical development of working-class and lesbian black

women, in alliance with other women of colour, in social movements pre-dating its move into the academy (Collins & Bilge, [2016](#)).

Framing intersectionality as a recent development in (black) feminist theory also relates to a problem in the way intersectionality is often discussed in generational terms within white feminist communities. Hemmings ([2011](#)) notes the common recurrence of a claim that feminism used to be exclusionary, but was subject to critique in the 1980s and is now moving on. Such narratives of progress construct a story whereby once black and queer critiques emerged, feminism became aware of its problem and moved into a new intersectional future. Generational framings of feminism have been widely critiqued, such as by Ahmed ([2012](#)), who notes that narratives which portray intersectionality as emerging from the current younger generation (contrasted with an exclusive older generation) not only ignore intersectionality's black feminist genealogy, but the debates that have always existed around axes of inclusion/exclusion. Reversed generational framings are found in works such as Fraser's ([2013](#)), advocating for a return to the second-wave, framed as predominantly socialist, in order to challenge the co-option of feminism by neoliberalism. Yet Bhandar and da Silva ([2013](#)) similarly critique Fraser for universalising white feminist history and rendering invisible contemporary black anti-capitalist feminism. This also risks undermining the ongoing value of socialist feminism, even in the act of advocating for its return, by associating socialist feminism with a previous era.

Generational framings are also linked to the take-up of intersectionality as a personal identity in that it is seen as integral to young feminism, defined against a supposedly exclusive older generation (Munro, [2013](#)). Third-wave feminism, which emerged in the 1990s, often claimed inclusivity as an identity through framing their movement as integrating race more than the

second-wave (Henry, [2004](#)). Yet, such claims to inclusivity were achieved through re-reading key second-wave women of colour, such as Audre Lorde, as third-wave feminists. This re-reading rendered the second-wave whiter than it was and obscured exclusions within the third-wave (Henry, [2004](#)). Gunaratnam (in Mizra & Gunaratnam, [2014](#)) similarly observes a contemporary trend for intersectionality to be used as a form of ‘anti-racist capital’ by white feminists who claim it as a label with little effort to interrogate how their group may enact white supremacy. In taking the label of intersectionality, white feminists displace the blame for racism onto other groups, rather than thinking about their own. The emphasis on *claiming* intersectionality can also mean that those who do not use the language of intersectionality are dismissed as exclusive regardless of whether their actual practice is intersectional.

While the focus of the above literature is on race, I argue that similar patterns are found in other axes of intersectionality such as trans-inclusion. Mackay ([2015b](#)) highlights that trans-inclusion has become a ‘feminist fault line’, or a point of highly charged debate within the movement. Some feminists do not recognise trans women as women (Jeffreys, [2014](#)) whereas others argue that trans women are women like any other (Penny, [2014](#)). Mackay ([2015b](#)) notes that some cis feminists see trans and feminist struggles as (potentially complementary but) distinct, as trans women are perceived to have lived experience of male socialisation, however temporary or marked by prejudice. Others such as Finlayson et al. ([2018](#)) argue that since gender is a political construct, gender identity matters in the way that socialisation manifests for individuals, while experience of oppression differs for all women. As such, trans women’s relation to structural patriarchy is closer to cis women’s than cis men’s. Trans politics are, therefore, re-read as an axis of intersectionality, as trans women cannot be segregated off from feminism any more than any other subset of women can. This article follows this latter understanding, while exploring how

discursive mobilisations of trans-inclusivity are illustrative of the problems with how intersectionality is more generally invoked.

As with intersectionality writ large, trans-inclusivity is sometimes understood in generational terms with young feminists held to be trans-inclusive and older feminists trans-exclusive. For example, Evans ([2015](#)) links anti-trans views with second-wave feminism generally and radical feminism particularly, while Munro ([2013](#)) links trans-inclusive intersectionality with young feminism. Radical feminism is often understood as uniquely anti-trans, a framing which can draw on misogynist stereotyping of the puritanical, essentialist 'rad-fem'. Williams ([2016](#)) notes that while TERF was originally merely descriptive of trans-exclusive forms of radical feminism, popular media, and sometimes feminists themselves, collapse radical feminism into the figure of the TERF which is then reviled. Yet while there are transphobic second-wave radical feminists, prominent radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon in an interview with TransAdvocate ([2015](#)) states 'I've always thought I don't care how someone becomes a woman ... women is a political category'. For MacKinnon, all women are social constructions and subject to oppression. Moreover, Heaney ([2016](#)), in a review of lesbian radical feminist organising of the 1970s, uncovers that while some radical feminists were trans-exclusive there were also those who argued for and organised around trans-inclusion.

Furthermore, trans feminists dispute that contemporary claims to trans-inclusion automatically result in the integration of trans politics in feminism. For example, Malatino ([2016](#)) argues that trans-inclusion in women's studies is often tokenistic and does not encourage cis students to confront their complicities in upholding transphobic frameworks or change how they conceive of gender. Namaste ([2011](#)) maintains that inclusion is insufficient and criticises a narrow focus on

identity for marginalising trans working-class women of colour's concerns about poverty and racism. Meanwhile, Stryker and Bettcher ([2016](#)) critique the dichotomy often drawn between trans-exclusive and trans-inclusive feminism as simplistic in ignoring the spectrum between the two as well as the variety of contexts in which activism takes place.

Much of the existing literature on the ways in which axes of intersectionality are taken up in ways which, paradoxically, maintain hegemonic norms focuses on academia or more institutional forms of activism. This article explores how such dynamics also apply in grassroots radical activism, which might be assumed to integrate intersectionality more thoroughly. While the literature notes how trans-inclusive rhetoric does not always result in the integration of trans politics, I demonstrate how the invocation of the very figure of the TERF – increasingly popular in feminism – can replicate patterns of exclusion. Finally, in examining how tropes of age are mobilised, this article also highlights diversity within the different feminist age cohorts, and supports those who argue that the debate in feminism is primarily political rather than generational (Mackay, [2015a](#)).

Researching intersectionality in the radical left

This research developed from my own involvement as a feminist and socialist in Scotland over the past 15 years. I participated in the Radical Independence Campaign which was founded in 2012 by socialist and anti-austerity groups as an explicitly anti-nationalist alternative to the mainstream independence campaign. RIC is pluralistic, containing a range of ideologies, and is structured around national forums where representatives from autonomous local groups decide national strategy (Alexander et al., [2019](#)). While RIC advocates for independence, it does so as a strategy to challenge neoliberalism through organising against austerity and for working-class

power (Davidson et al., [2016](#)). As is common in radical organising, women, minorities and LGBTQ+ people participated in RIC but were also active in autonomous groups based around said identities (Morrison, [2018](#)).

The data in this article come from 37 semi-structured interviews I carried out with activists who self-identified as pro-independence, feminist and on the radical left in the run up to the Scottish independence referendum of 18 September 2014 with a small number of follow-up interviews in early 2017⁵. Interviewees were between the ages of 20 and 72, a small number identified as working-class and four identified as Scots Asian. Only one participant identified themselves as trans. Therefore, given that working-class, trans, and minority feminists are active in Scotland, the sample is not representative of all radical left feminism. However, as this research suggests that white, middle-class, cis women remain dominant in general feminist radical left groups, it is valuable to study this cohort. While all interviewees were pro-independence, many discussed their experiences across a variety of feminist, queer, and left groups, not all of which were explicitly pro-independence, indicating that the findings likely speak to broader experiences rather than a distinct pro-independence feminist left. Thus, while this article is based on the Scottish pro-independence radical left, the case is thought to be organisationally and ideologically representative of dominant feminist radical left spaces in Scotland.

The data were part of a larger study on radical left feminism which discussed three interrelated areas: how far feminism shaped the wider radical left, feminist activism, and how far feminists built an intersectional movement. As such, the interviews explored feminist activism to influence and contest the broader radical left. In the discussion emerged a disjuncture between a rhetorical commitment to intersectionality and the centring of white, cis, middle-class feminists. Activism

tended to focus around violence against women and austerity, both valuable but with minimal integration of race or LGBTQ+ politics in the deployment of this activism (Morrison, [2018](#)).

This article focuses on the political impacts of this discursive mobilisation of intersectionality, while the implications of the critique call for activists to reassess their practices.

Interviewees were not asked directly about intersectionality or trans-inclusion, but rather broader questions about whether they had encountered any barriers to participation. This allowed interviewees to define the terms used and what they considered important when discussing inclusion.⁶ These questions often led to extensive dialogue on the perceived importance of intersectionality and trans-inclusion. For example, Lorna (thirties) called herself a ‘radical intersectionalist’ while Sophie (twenties) thought an ‘intersectional outlook is important’. Similarly, Aileen (twenties) noted that trans-inclusion was a ‘massive issue’ for feminism at present while Ellen (thirties) mentioned that ‘every time you have a feminist discussion these days the two things that will come up are trans issues and sex workers’.

This article can be termed ‘intimate insider’ research as I have personal connections to the research field (Taylor, [2011](#)). While insider research is sometimes charged with bias, feminist research critiques claims to objectivity, and highlights that all knowledge is socially constructed (DuBois, [1983](#)). Therefore, feminist research requires reflection on the social position of the researcher. As a participant in RIC, I had friendships and political contacts among the interviewees, 6 of whom were personal friends, 10 of whom were known to me through campaigning and 21 of whom were unknown to me before the research. Nonetheless, researchers have questioned the insider/outsider binary, pointing out that community status is always fluid (Naples, [1996](#)). While I had closer personal and political relationships with some individuals and

groups, these categories were changeable, with some of those who I knew in 2014 no longer active, while others who were unknown to me before the interview later became colleagues. Thus, I stress that I do not claim to be representing *the* insider opinion, rather this analysis can only ever be my own interpretation of the data.

My (shifting) insider status affected this research in various ways. My identity as a feminist and socialist was mentioned by several interviewees as making them more comfortable due to a perceived hostility from academia towards those identities. However, interviewing friends also brings challenges. A common concern in qualitative research is that participants are eager to provide the information they think we want to hear, while Taylor ([2011](#)) suggests the intimate knowledge friends have of one another may mean that they can tailor answers more effectively. Consequently, it was important to reformulate questions and follow up answers to reduce the potential for participants to tailor their responses. For example, when asking about barriers to participation, I followed up responses to ask for examples interviewees had personally experienced, or witnessed, to reduce the possibility that they were citing factors that they thought I expected to hear. I was also wary of the opposite problem – that participants forget they are in an interview and reveal ‘too much’. Therefore, as well as ensuring that participants had an information sheet, understood the research, and gave informed consent, I also sent a copy of the transcript to interviewees to edit as they saw fit. This ensured that power was not entirely unidirectional and interviewees had some control over what information ended up in the public realm. In the end, most interviewees made no changes to the transcript, and those who made edits were based on concerns of anonymity rather than content.

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: (1) familiarisation with data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review themes; (5) define/name themes; (6) produce report. These steps are not linear but involve returning to the data throughout to further refine themes. Particularly in the final stage I struggled with a sense of accountability to the field, an oft-cited aspect of insider research (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016). Most notably, I experienced some uncertainty around how to present tensions relating to perceptions of marginalisation, since writing critically about marginalisation within feminism could be perceived as criticism of interviewees. I dealt with this uncertainty by removing references to any given feminist group to highlight that the critiques raised relate to tendencies across radical left feminism, not any specific group. Anonymity is a concern with small communities like the Scottish feminist radical left and pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees. Finally, I do not distance myself from complicity in the patterns of exclusion that I analyse, but rather I emphasise, as a member of the movements discussed, I am part of such patterns. The following section begins the empirical analysis by looking at the multi-dimensional nature of interviewee perceptions of marginalisation, which contrast with the rhetorical emphasis they placed on intersectionality outlined above. A subsequent section explores how this apparent discrepancy is maintained through interviewee invocation of the TERF as an example of how some mobilisations of (axes of) intersectionality can uphold rather than tackle hegemonic norms.

Multi-dimensional marginalisations: intersectionality and feminism

Despite the emphasis on intersectionality in the interviews, many of the interviewees discussed feeling marginalised within feminist communities across differing identity axes of race, gender identity and class. In this section I consider the 'messiness' of systems of oppression (Nash,

[2010](#), p. 10), pointing to how differently positioned interviewees understood themselves to be marginalised in different aspects of the movement. I highlight that these varying perceptions of marginalisation are formed by interviewee subjectivity, with trans, working-class and/or racialised minority interviewees voicing feelings of marginalisation on lines of gender identity, class and/or race but white, cis and/or middle-class interviewees either overlooking or believing race, trans and class to be already integrated into their feminism. This recalls McIntosh's ([1989](#)) argument that people often do not see the privilege from which they themselves benefit.

Interviewee narratives revealed tensions between differently positioned feminists who emphasised different axes of inclusion. As already noted, trans-inclusion was prominently discussed throughout the interviews. However, the only, trans interviewee Carey (twenties) argued that, trans issues were marginal to the women's session at a Radical Independence Campaign conference they ⁷ attended:

There wasn't really any room to talk about, trans issues, someone did speak about LGBT issues at the main plenary but no, trans stuff so I spoke more specifically on, trans stuff ... and there was some stuff that was a bit problematic but I don't blame them because there was no space to deal with that (Carey).

This comment indicates that there was some feeling that trans politics were not centred in RIC, while there remained problematic discussion of trans issues. The findings of the larger research this article draws from highlighted how feminist activism did not show an integration of, trans politics beyond the rhetorical level (Morrison, [2018](#)). While Carey is a single voice here, their comment supports those trans activists discussed above who note that in purportedly trans-inclusive groups, inclusion can be limited to a small number of tokenised voices (Namaste,

[2011](#)). Additionally, such inclusion does not provide space for challenges to ongoing cis-normativity (Malatino, 2016). This was also indicated by Carey in stating there was ‘no space to deal with’ the problematic stuff. Thus, claims to trans-inclusion does not necessarily mean that trans politics are well-integrated into feminism.

Nonetheless, some of the working-class interviewees voiced their perception that issues of class were marginalised in feminist spaces, with some attributing this marginalisation to the focus on trans issues. For example, Ellen (thirties), who identified as being from a working-class background, felt that poverty was being neglected in feminist discussions:

I think that the disagreements that exist around those issues [trans and sex worker inclusion] distract or detract from people seeing other issues of feminism, the other inequalities that are going on. There is too much descending into fights on those two particular issues so that other things are being neglected I feel - both of those are really important but should they take up as much of our time as they currently do? Does trans always trump poverty? If we were in a room with other feminists right now you can guarantee that I would get abuse for even saying that (Ellen).

Ellen felt that the trans and sex work debates were displacing, rather than enriching, discussion of class and gender. Yet the contrast with Carey’s comment suggests that trans issues may not be as central as Ellen perceived. Notions of distraction have a long history in critiques of intersectionality, which sections of the left dismiss as diverting attention from the ‘real’ or ‘universal’ struggle of class (Allen, [2018](#)). Nonetheless, this is not to deny Ellen’s perception that class was marginalised, as other working-class interviewees also felt overlooked, particularly in queer feminist groups. Rather, it may be that class is marginalised by middle-class

cis and trans feminisms, just as trans is marginalised in cis middle and working-class feminism.

This suggests that rather than implementing intersectionality, different feminists contest different lines of exclusion and can see their own marginalisation, but not that of other groups.

Furthermore, where interviewees did highlight marginalisation that did not affect themselves, they tended to overstate how inclusive their own movement was towards these marginalisations.

The four Scots Asian interviewees mentioned race as an axis of marginalisation across all feminist spaces. Scots Asian feminist Manjit (twenties) stated that ‘intersectional’ spaces were ‘still a bunch of white girls’, which meant that black women’s voices tended to be overlooked. Similarly, Scots Asian feminist Faiza (forties) mentioned she regularly felt she was the ‘token’ woman of colour used to legitimise the image of feminism as inclusive. Neither can such white dominance be attributed to Scotland’s predominantly white population, with Bassel and Emejulu ([2017](#)) pointing to similar dynamics for minority activists in more diverse England. In this Scottish study, white activists claimed race as important for feminism. However, as discussed above, there was little evidence of a race perspective in their activism (Morrison, [2018](#)). This contradiction can be seen when white feminist Sandra (forties) stated that she was ‘fully into intersectionality’, mentioning that those in her group had to be ‘willing to be challenged on racism’, but also acknowledged how the group was white, explaining:

I mean the thing has been pretty much dead for about 6 months ... essentially we are just too knackered and we’re busy and yeh the young women who were involved seemed to be mostly students and then they go away for the holidays ... so if we could have made it work we were definitely, I mean 2 of those women already do hard core anti-racism work in supporting refugees and have their own connections within ethnic minority

communities and all that stuff so it was all there to be done but we basically dropped the ball (Sandra).

Rather than question the ways in which white activists, and herself, may be reproducing hegemonic whiteness, Sandra's explanation for why her group continued to be white had focussed on the limited time and energy activists had to devote to activism. Her comments recall the argument made above that intersectionality is sometimes taken up as a label, or anti-racist capital, rather than used to grapple with whiteness as a structure of power (Mizra & Gunaratnam, [2014](#)). Thus, even where inclusion was claimed rhetorically, material practices did not fully integrate minority women's feminism.

Rather than building an intersectional movement, the analysis of interviewee's discussion of various lines of marginalisation suggests that feminism on the radical left contains many ongoing exclusions. Yet, these exclusions are complex and multiple with interviewee subjectivity affecting their perception of inclusion. Feminists emphasised marginalisations that they themselves suffered, and overlooked their privilege along other axes of oppression. Thus, radical left feminism appears to be marked by tensions and complexities around multiple axes of exclusion, as with prior feminist mobilisations. Notably, even where marginalisations other than their own were noted, these were either critiqued for displacing a focus on their own oppression, or claimed merely rhetorically. A key technique for justifying such rhetorical claims, through invoking the figure of the TERF, is explored in the following section.

Invoking the ‘TERF’: legitimising claims to intersectionality

A central question for this article is how participants mobilised the trope of the TERF to present the contemporary movement as intersectional. Interviewees pointed to the TERF as a symbol of an exclusive, essentialist ‘old’ form of feminism where second-wave feminism was elided with radical feminism, and radical feminism was elided with trans-exclusionary feminist positions. Invoking the TERF also highlights how intersectionality may be (mis)used as a label or identity by interviewees, rather than as a lens to analyse power. The tendency to invoke the TERF was more prevalent among the younger interviewees under 30 years old. Nonetheless, a few of the older interviewees also expressed the belief that older forms of feminism were exclusive, while some younger interviewees did not identify their feminism in generational terms. This supports Mackay’s (2015a) argument that contemporary feminist perspectives should not be understood generationally, as young (and older) women continue to articulate a range of feminist positions.

Many of the younger interviewees associated transphobic positions with older feminists and what they perceived to be old forms of feminism, primarily radical feminism. Siobhan (twenties) commented on how she felt that a fellow feminist was exclusionary, commenting that:

She seems to have gone full TERF. I suppose she is from that generation (Siobhan).

Siobhan associated older feminists with trans-exclusionary positions. Jessica (twenties) also associated transphobic positions with older feminists, but more openly differentiated herself as a young feminist from such a position:

I mean most of my friends are involved in some kinda LGBT scene or activism, a fair few of my friends are trans as well, so that is a big thing for this generation, I know that

some people, say who are of the older generation and fall on the radical spectrum, sometimes get raised eyebrows at them, it's like that doesn't mean you're transphobic now does it? (Jessica).

Jessica links transphobic positions, and radical feminism to an older generation. Such a perspective overlooks the multiplicity of feminist positions in all age groups, as well as the multiplicity of activism around trans issues within radical feminism historically, highlighted above (Heaney, [2016](#)). The tight association of radical feminism with transphobic positions, despite the variety of positions that radical feminists have always taken, also indicates the reproduction of the hegemonic misogynistic media framing of the 'rad-fem' as an exclusive hate figure. Furthermore, it was notable that socialist feminism was not mentioned by any of the interviewees, even though a majority defined themselves as socialists. This absence of socialist feminism recalls the critical reception of Fraser's ([2013](#)) work, which suggests that assigning certain feminisms to certain time periods renders invisible ongoing (black) anti-capitalist feminism and their value for contemporary activism.

The rejection of an older, supposedly exclusive, feminism also risks occluding ongoing marginalisations in contemporary feminism on the radical left. Jade (twenties) commented during a discussion on intersectionality:

J: I think, if we're talking about the Scottish feminist movement, or British, and the American one, from what I see and on the news I think it's very focused on intersectionality, which is obviously a good thing.

Me: Do you have any examples?

J: Well with all the focus on, trans rights, like you know there's been a big change in focus onto, trans rights in the past few years unlike before you know, like with the radical feminists, and now people are fighting to have their pronouns recognised etc., so that is intersectionality.

For Jade, the increased visibility of the trans movement itself is evidence of intersectionality. However, her narrative did not consider inclusion within feminism or whether trans was integrated within the movement. Moreover, she did not raise race or class during the interview, suggesting that these categories were not central to her feminist thought. As I note above, feminists have argued that generational framings of intersectionality erase the black feminist genealogy of the concept (Ahmed, [2012](#)). This framing of intersectionality as emanating from the contemporary movement erases the hierarchical power dynamics which continue to structure feminism.

While this rejection of older forms of feminism was more common among the younger interviewees, similar logics existed in the narratives of some older interviewees. The presence of such logics in older women's narratives reminds us that it is a political, not generational, perspective (Mackay, [2015a](#)). As part of a discussion about divisions in feminism, Lorna (thirties) described her own political evolution from lesbian separatist radical feminism to what she termed 'radical intersectionalist' feminism:

I am queer and I came out at 15 and got quite involved in lesbian separatist politics and some of the women who talked about feminism had that very restricted view and it was the only view, that was late 80s early 90s and growing up through that I've had to really fight to get to the position I'm at and it has been difficult and I've had to really call out

my own really shitty opinions and beliefs that have no evidence base and actually getting out and speaking to lots of different women, lots of different people who identified as feminists, speaking to sex-workers, to, trans women and non-binary people, so for me feminism has to be inclusive and I'm a white, cis femme queer and the feminism I grew up in didn't really take into account some of that (Lorna).

Lorna's politics had evolved since she first got involved in feminism and she felt she was more conscious of how women experienced oppression differently depending on their race, gender identity or sexuality. Yet her account frames this evolution not as a personal development but a shift in feminism in general – the feminism she 'grew up in' was exclusive, whereas contemporary feminism is more inclusive. Lorna's experience demonstrates that while the 1980s is often heralded as a breakthrough decade for black feminism, black feminist critiques did not permeate all activist spaces. Yet black feminists highlight that there have been, and continue to be, both productive alliances and exclusions between black and white women's organising in Scotland (Arshad & McCrum, [1989](#); Heuchan, [2016](#)). Therefore, in framing exclusive forms of feminism in the 1980s as 'the only view' available, Lorna's narrative risks reproducing hegemonic logics which assign racism to a previous feminism and elides ongoing marginalisations in radical left feminism.

Younger interviewees were also not homogenous, and voiced a range of feminist positions.

Aileen (twenties) associated her feminism with the second-wave despite her age:

I think my understanding of feminism is probably more second-wave, like I'm more a kinda anti-porn, and people should be criminalised for buying sex, people should not be criminalised for selling sex .

In some ways Aileen replicates a generational understanding of feminism as she associates particular waves with particular ideological positions. Long's (2012) study underscores that positions on pornography and sex work were highly debated within the second-wave, and contemporary movement, rather than political positions belonging to given historical moments. Yet, in associating herself with an 'older' form of feminism as a young woman, Aileen highlights that women take various ideological positions across age groups. Moreover, other interviewees did not view feminism in generational terms. For example, Jashar (twenties), when asked if she felt generation played a role in feminism, replied:

No, I don't know ... I haven't seen it [generational difference] .

Jashar identified as a socialist and appeared to see debates in feminism as ideological not generational. Thus, younger feminists were not a homogenous group and took different political views and different views on generation.

There was a tendency in the interviewee narratives to frame contemporary radical left feminism as inclusive, even intersectional, through the rejection of 'older' transphobic forms of feminism elided with radical feminism. This mobilisation of the TERF trope presents the current movement as inclusive while vilifying other forms of feminism as old or outdated and denying any contribution they might make to understandings of gender. Such logics impede intergenerational dialogue and lessons from past struggles are rendered invisible, or their value is denied. Meanwhile, the contemporary movement can be romanticised with ongoing exclusions occluded. Nonetheless, while the rejection of older forms of feminism as exclusive and transphobic was more common among the younger interviewees, interviewees of all age groups were heterogeneous. Therefore, the analysis here supports the view that debate around trans-

inclusion and intersectionality within feminism should be understood as political rather than generational.

Conclusions

This article has examined intersectionality in feminism in the radical left through a case study of the Scottish pro-independence radical left. The discussion has shown that despite a rhetoric of intersectionality, feminism in the radical left continued to be marked by marginalisations, as with previous generations of feminism. Moreover, as differently racialised, classed and gendered interviewees perceived different groups as inclusive or exclusive, subjectivities shape how feminists understand marginalisation. Drawing on black feminist critiques, I highlight that intersectionality is taken up in ways that maintain rather than tackle multi-dimensional lines of inclusion and exclusion of race, class and gender.

I argue that the discussion around trans-inclusivity is illustrative of such a discursive mobilisation of intersectionality, whereby trans-inclusivity is taken up as an identity to differentiate contemporary young feminism from previous generations. This works to mask continuity in marginalisations within feminism. Specifically, I argue that claims to trans-inclusive intersectionality were linked to the invocation of the TERF as a symbol of ‘old’ radical feminism against which many interviewees contrasted their own movement. This dynamic reproduced generational framings of feminism, although I highlighted that interviewees of all ages continued to articulate various perspectives. Significantly, despite the emphasis on denouncing TERFs, the only trans interviewee, Carey, felt marginalised. While a single voice, their comment recalls existing trans literature arguing that claims to trans-inclusivity do not necessarily result in critiques of cis-normativity (Malatino, 2016). Thus, invoking the TERF may

not only reproduce norms of class or race, but also gender identity, re-marginalising trans activists. As mentioned above, this study likely does not represent all feminist radical spaces as trans, working-class and minority feminist groups are active in Scotland but under-represented in the sample. Nonetheless, the ideological and organisational form of Scottish feminism are not unique, and dynamics described here are found elsewhere. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of going beyond the level of discourse to explore material politics when considering to what extent a movement is intersectional.

I stress I do not seek to criticise the concept of intersectionality in this article, nor trans-inclusivity. In contrast, ultimately the discussion in this article highlights the necessity of looking beyond the mere invocation of intersectionality to consider whether we are implementing practices which centre racialised minority, working-class or LGBTQ+ women. Rather than groups claiming themselves to be already intersectional, feminists on the radical left, as well as feminists more generally, should analyse the various ways in which power relations operate within our groups. Doing so could build on existing voices by arguing that marginalised groups must not be merely included, but that differing perspectives can change the way we conceive of gender and the focus of our activism (Malatino, 2016). Additionally, the discussion points to the necessity of engaging with complex movement histories to recast feminist debates as political rather than generational. Hence, historical radical trans-inclusive feminism could become a resource for challenging trans-exclusion through decoupling the idea of the TERF from its generational and radical feminist framing (Heaney, [2016](#)). Such openness to constantly rethinking how multiple axes of power shape our movements is essential to building a more intersectional feminism.

Notes

1. The contemporary movement has its roots in the onset of neoliberal restructuring, and anti-Thatcher sentiment, in the 1970s and '80s during which time the Conservative vote collapsed in Scotland. The Scottish left broadly coalesced around demands for devolution, then independence, as a way of challenging neoliberalism. The 2014 campaign emerged from anti-austerity campaigning following the return of a (minority) Conservative government in the UK in 2010 yet with only one Scottish seat (Davidson, [2014](#)). Moreover, the leading pro-independence electoral party, the Scottish National Party, calls itself social-democratic and rhetorically positions itself to the left of the Labour Party (Davidson, [2014](#)). While not to deny that nationalist sentiment may play a role for some involved, as Mooney notes (in Davidson et al., [2016](#)) national sentiment was usually linked to notions of social justice.

2. Left here is all those who understand societal inequality to be structural and socially constructed rather than the result of individual merit. Radical refers to political projects which seek to transform systems of power rather than reform them (Pugh, [2009](#)).

3. Radical left support for Scottish independence dates back to the early 20th century. In the contemporary moment a pro-independence position was adopted by most of the radical left thus can be held as representative of the Scottish radical left generally (Morrison, [2018](#)).

4. 96% white in the last census (Scotland's Census, [2013](#)).

5. Four of the interviewees were originally contacted in their capacity as members of established feminist organisations in the Scottish third sector. However, all four were pro-independence, feminists and supporters of RIC and so were maintained with their consent in the final sample.

6. See Appendix A for an outline of the interview schedule.

7. Carey used they/them as singular pronouns.

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