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Speech given by CIJ President  
Kimberlé Crenshaw  
at the Gala co-organised with the  
Gunda Werner Institute

**T**hank you to my hosts, Emilia Roig and Miriam Aced of the Center for Intersectional Justice, and Peggy Piesche, Ines Kappert and Hannah Lichtenthaeler, and of the Heinrich Böll Foundation for your excellent coordination and gracious hospitality. It is an honor to be here with you all today not only to commemorate the 30th year of intersectionality but importantly to support the wonderful work of the CIJ. As I explained to my law students when I literally ran out of class on Friday, yes, I am indeed going to Berlin--Emilia Roig called, and no, class is not cancelled Tuesday--I'll be right back! I'm very proud of the work that Emilia has done at CIJ and honored to continue to serve as CIJ's president. And I want to thank Ines, Hannah, and Peggy for supporting CIJ with this wonderful party.

So I have been desperately trying to narrow down all that is on my heart to share in the time that I have. It wasn't easy. In the last two years alone, the trajectory of intersectionality has revealed surprising and encouraging uptake across the globe. A colleague has urged on the "victory lap" speech. Yet it would be false and disconcerting, particularly in light of shocking developments and truly frightening events have occurred that could have us here until the early morning hours if we just listed them: Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Charleston, Pittsburgh, Paris, Syria, Manchester, Orlando, Parkland, South Sudan--now symbolize sights of hatred, carnage and violence rather than places where people live out their lives in peace. In this rapidly deteriorating political environment, new and old democracies have been destabilized by those who have cynically used primitive ideologies to demarcate who belongs and who interlopes, who is virtuous and who is a contaminant, who must rule and who must follow. These tragedies should reveal to us how insanely naive the claims of "post-racial" or "post-feminist" or post-anything have been. And this is before we even get to intersectionality.

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Many in this room no doubt relate intersectionality to the current crisis as cautionary reminder that as we move against the societal legacies of genocide, racism, patriarchy, and imperialism, we must do so with an attentiveness to their interrelated dimensions. Yet there are competing interpretations that have tamed, distorted and even sometimes blamed intersectionality for the rise of the political right and the violence that has accompanied it.

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There is irony here in this blaming that bespeaks the appeal of intersectionality even among those who long to defeat it. In a fascinating twist, critics from the Right - I call them anti-intersectionality intersectionalists - are increasingly using intersectionality to advance their own bold performance of race and gender grievance--even as they critique it. For example, a recent video complains that "intersectionality" is a ranking system that defines cisgender straight white men as the newly disempowered pariah class whose opinions no longer matter. I had personally assumed that the contradiction of using *intersectional identities* to critique intersectionality as merely identity politics would be too porous to carry into water into respectable political discourses. But then I watched

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Senator Lindsay Graham from South Carolina channel precisely this claim in the stately halls of the American Senate in the aftermath of

the Kavanaugh hearings as he shouted, "I know I am a single white male from South Carolina and I am told I should shut up, but I will not shut up!"

Strange things happen in rooms occupied by powerful people who are largely untouched by the dynamics that trouble, interrupt and even destroy the lives of the dispossessed. While the actions of elites may differ in terms of their specifics, one common move can be seen globally: the desire to solve a societal problem by gentrifying its rhetoric or completely erasing it altogether. Concepts articulated to draw attention to the marginalized are weaponized by the elite to silence their voices. Problems are purportedly solved by severing the rhetorical tongues of those who would denounce the realities in which they live. Allies will stand by or even enable this muting, so long as their own interests are being served. In the US, Graham replaces the grievance of racialized others with complaints of straight white men like himself. Elsewhere, anti-racism is delegitimized by assuming that the fiction of race extends to the reality of racism. As if there's some magic in the belief that if we don't see, hear or speak evil, there won't be any evil. We tried that once in the US. It was called post-racialism. Eight years later, we got Donald Trump. And recall it was his very fine people who marched with torches chanting, "Jews will not replace us."

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Some moderates and liberals have cast this frightening development as a casualty of what they call identity politics. For example, my Columbia colleague, Mark Lilla's response to the 2016 election seems to suggest that it wasn't patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and white supremacy that underwrote the post-Obama lurch to the Right in the US. Instead, the blame rests on paying too much attention to issues that divide us.

At bottom is a nostalgia for the “good old days” when our national identities held us together in the pursuit of a more perfect union. And since the critics’ understanding of intersectionality is that it is identity politics run amok--the mothership of political mischief--then dismantling intersectionality is an urgent route towards arriving at a simpler, more comforting understanding of the world we now live in. I have sometimes been called upon to account for the mischief that intersectionality purportedly creates, as I was when a publication dedicated to exploring “new” ideas called to interview me about a year ago about intersectionality. Of course, as far as “breaking news” was concerned, they were about 30 years late, but nonetheless, in my naivete, I thought the intersectionality wars might refer to any number of ways that certain populations fell through the cracks of conventional politics. I soon found out however, that the “wars” were not, for example, about the struggle to elevate and address state violence against Black women as our Say Her Name campaign has done, seeking to elevate the fact that black girls as young as 7 and black women as old as 95 have been killed by the police. 60% of Black women killed by police were unarmed at the time of the interaction making them the only race-gender group to have a majority of their members unarmed when killed.

Nor was violence against women of color, police abuse of women who are poor, or trans, or homeless, or chemically dependent or involved in sex work a point of reference to the war. Although sexual violence is the second most common complaint against police officers, the war wasn't about that report, nor about the OKC trial and conviction of a police officer for raping 8 Black women.

The story was not about the specific ways that war over immigration overlooked consequences of status insecurity on immigrant and refugee women and girls, making them more vulnerable to domestic abuse as well as rape and harassment by their employers--a truly global phenomena. Nor was it about the astronomical rates of sexual violence and murder faced by indigenous women in North America or about often invisibilized double discrimination Dalit women in South Asia face as subjects of both casteism and sexism. It wasn't about how the mainstreaming of marriage equality through "the couple next door," framework left out millions of queer people who aren't "just like us" or about how billions of people most likely to suffer the immediate impact of global warming are least likely to shape the movement against it. No, it was intersectionality itself that was being interrogated and intercepted, asked to justify itself as an interloper in the gated community of established ideas. For those of you on the edge of your seats for a response to all of this, like that reporter, I must now manage your expectations. Over the years I have argued that we can learn much more about intersectionality by understanding intersectionality not as a thing, but a way of seeing, thinking and doing — a way of talking back to the limited conceptions of social power that constrain our ability to take meaningful transformative action.

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Intersectionality was from its inception articulated to capture law's refusal to see compound discrimination; offered as a word picture to make plain what the law didn't see. It has since come to be identified in relation to many things, and at the same time, it is not just about those things: intersectionality is indeed about identity, but not only about identity. It is a product of Black feminist thinking, but it is not only about Black women. It reflects encounters with law, but it speaks far beyond juridical categories.

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So despite being tempted to respond to the nostalgia for an anti-intersectional past that seems so in vogue these days, I want to redouble our efforts to look back to tell the long story of how we have come to this place and how that story must inform our present. The struggles for race and gender justice, especially when it comes to the cataclysmic upheavals that leave ugly scars on our body politic, are always, as time moves forward, conflicts over the narrative. What is the story? Who gets to tell it? What gets elevated as truth and what gets left out shapes the way we think and talk about justice for generations to come. Whether the backlash politics of today will carry this malignant evil into the future is the story we are writing today.

Intersectionality - far from being the enabler of this current backlash - is a repository for the untold narratives that shape the texture of social justice, that embody discoveries and commitments that pull our siloed movements forward rather than drive them apart. We have to tell different stories. Our stories.

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