



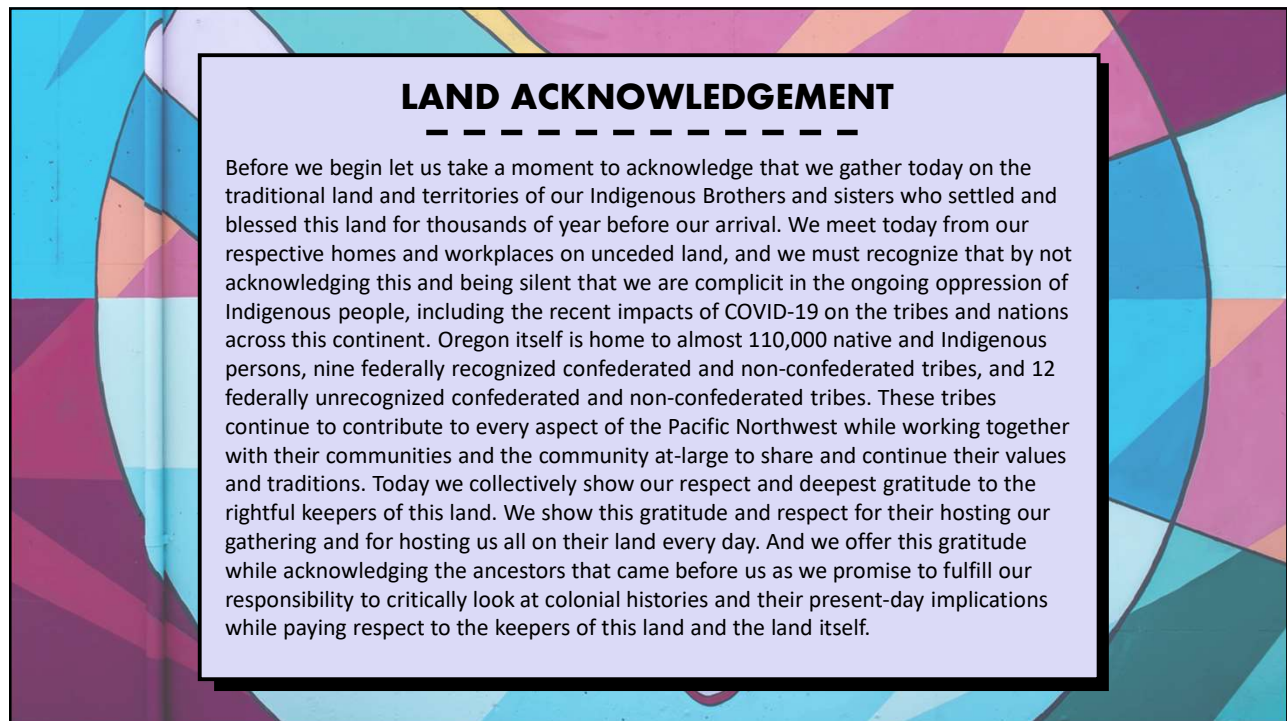
INTERSECTIONALITY VS. INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

PHAROAH BOLDING

Director of Human Resources,
Outside In

www.pharoahbolding.com

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Before we begin let us take a moment to acknowledge that we gather today on the traditional land and territories of our Indigenous Brothers and sisters who settled and blessed this land for thousands of year before our arrival. We meet today from our respective homes and workplaces on unceded land, and we must recognize that by not acknowledging this and being silent that we are complicit in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous people, including the recent impacts of COVID-19 on the tribes and nations across this continent. Oregon itself is home to almost 110,000 native and Indigenous persons, nine federally recognized confederated and non-confederated tribes, and 12 federally unrecognized confederated and non-confederated tribes. These tribes continue to contribute to every aspect of the Pacific Northwest while working together with their communities and the community at-large to share and continue their values and traditions. Today we collectively show our respect and deepest gratitude to the rightful keepers of this land. We show this gratitude and respect for their hosting our gathering and for hosting us all on their land every day. And we offer this gratitude while acknowledging the ancestors that came before us as we promise to fulfill our responsibility to critically look at colonial histories and their present-day implications while paying respect to the keepers of this land and the land itself.

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COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

- Stay engaged – for yourself and the folx you’re in community with
- Embrace discomfort
- Listen to understand, not to respond
- Aim for confidential sharing
- Allow space for others to speak
- Utilize *your* affinity group for emotional support and labor – not only during this discussion but after this discussion
- Expect and accept non-closure

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INTERSECTIONALITY IS...?

Intersectionality is a theory that was developed by *Kimberlé Crenshaw*, Professor of Law at UCLA and Columbia Law School. Crenshaw is a leading authority in the area of Civil Rights, Black feminist legal theory, critical race theory, and race, racism and the law.

Intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender identity, sexual identity, and disability as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

These places of marginalization are not separate in creating impact but are interconnected and often compound one another.

Intersectionality's roots are Black feminism and the lived experience of Black women's oppression. It is also an expansion and evolution of concepts put forth in **critical race theory**, work that Crenshaw also pioneered.



Credit: Nansen Clements for Vox

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INTERSECTIONALITY IS...?

Critical race theory (CRT), the view that the law and legal institutions are inherently racist and that race itself, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is a socially constructed concept that is used by white people to further their economic and political interests at the expense of people of color.

According to CRT, racial inequality and inequity emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that white people create between “races” to maintain elite white interests in labor markets and politics, giving rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities.



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INTERSECTIONALITY IS...?

CRT emerged in the 1980s and '90s among a group of legal scholars in response to what seemed to Crenshaw and her colleagues like a false consensus: that discrimination and racism in the law were irrational, and “that once the irrational distortions of bias were removed, the underlying legal and socioeconomic order would revert to a neutral, benign state of impersonally apportioned justice.” Crenshaw argued that this was a delusion that was as comforting as it was dangerous.

Let’s be real: racism didn’t just stop in 1965 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. It wasn’t just a blip in the nation’s history that the law would and could make “go away” through legislation and create an aura of safety for persons of color. The reality is that the U.S. American legal and socioeconomic order was largely built on racism and white supremacy.

Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality was first brought into the public eye in 1989, when she published a paper titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” The paper centers on three legal cases that dealt with the issues of both racial discrimination and sex discrimination and argued that the court’s narrow view of discrimination was a prime example of the law seeming to forget and neglect the reality that black women are both black and female, and thus subject to discrimination based on both race, gender, and often, a combination of the two.

This was on full display in the 1976 court case *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*.

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DeGRAFFENREID VS. GENERAL MOTORS

DeGraffenreid v. General Motors was a 1976 case in which five black women sued General Motors for a seniority policy that they argued targeted black women exclusively.

Simply put, GM did not hire black women before 1964. This meant that when seniority-based layoffs arrived during an early 1970s recession, all the black women hired after 1964 were subsequently laid off.

While it is obvious on paper that a policy like that didn't fall under just gender or just race discrimination but both, the court decided that efforts to bind together both racial discrimination and sex discrimination claims — rather than sue based on each separately — would be unworkable.

In May 1976, Judge Harris Wargelin ruled against the plaintiffs in the case, writing in part that “black women” could not be considered a separate, protected class within the law, or else it would risk opening a “Pandora’s box” of minorities who would demand to be heard in the law:

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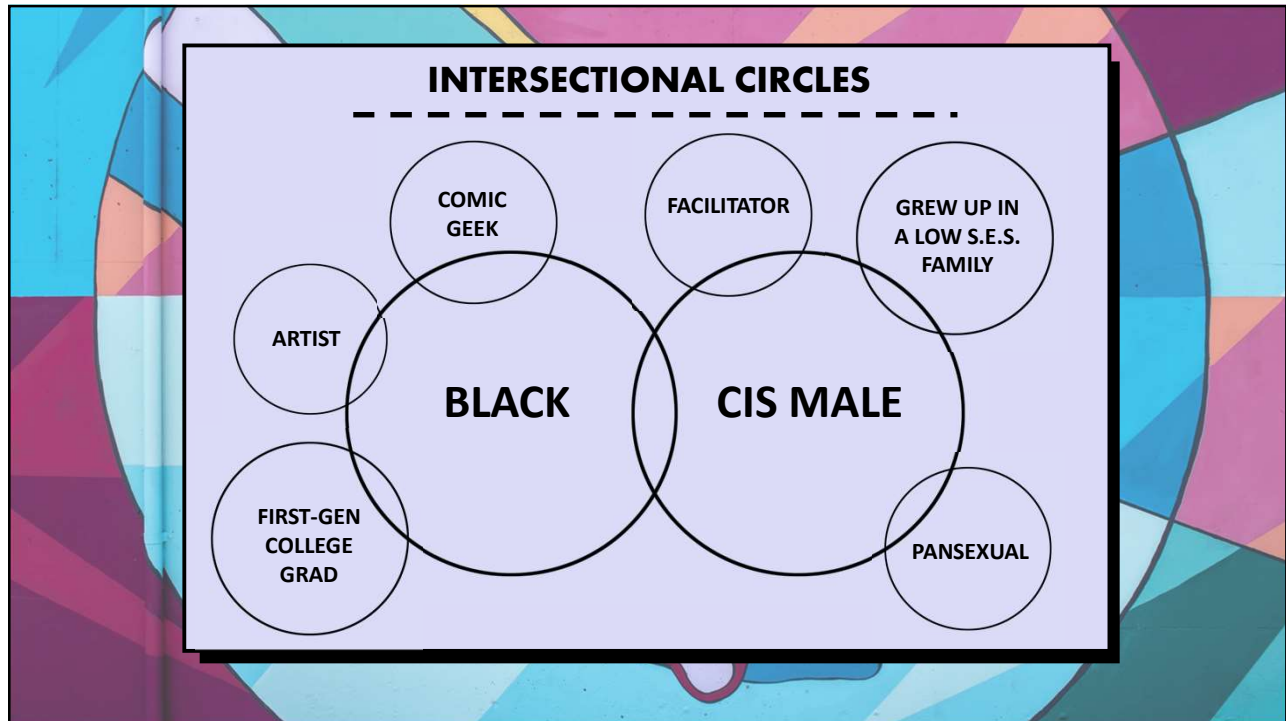
DeGRAFFENREID VS. GENERAL MOTORS

“The legislative history surrounding Title VII does not indicate that the goal of the statute was to create a new classification of ‘black women’ who would have greater standing than, for example, a black male. The prospect of the creation of new classes of protected minorities, governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening the hackneyed Pandora’s box.”

Crenshaw argues in her paper that by treating Black women as purely women or purely Black, the courts, as they did in 1976, have repeatedly ignored specific challenges that face black women as a group.

Crenshaw’s theory is now mainstream. Over the last few decades the theory of **intersectionality** has been expanded to include multiple categories of identity but maintains a basis in race.

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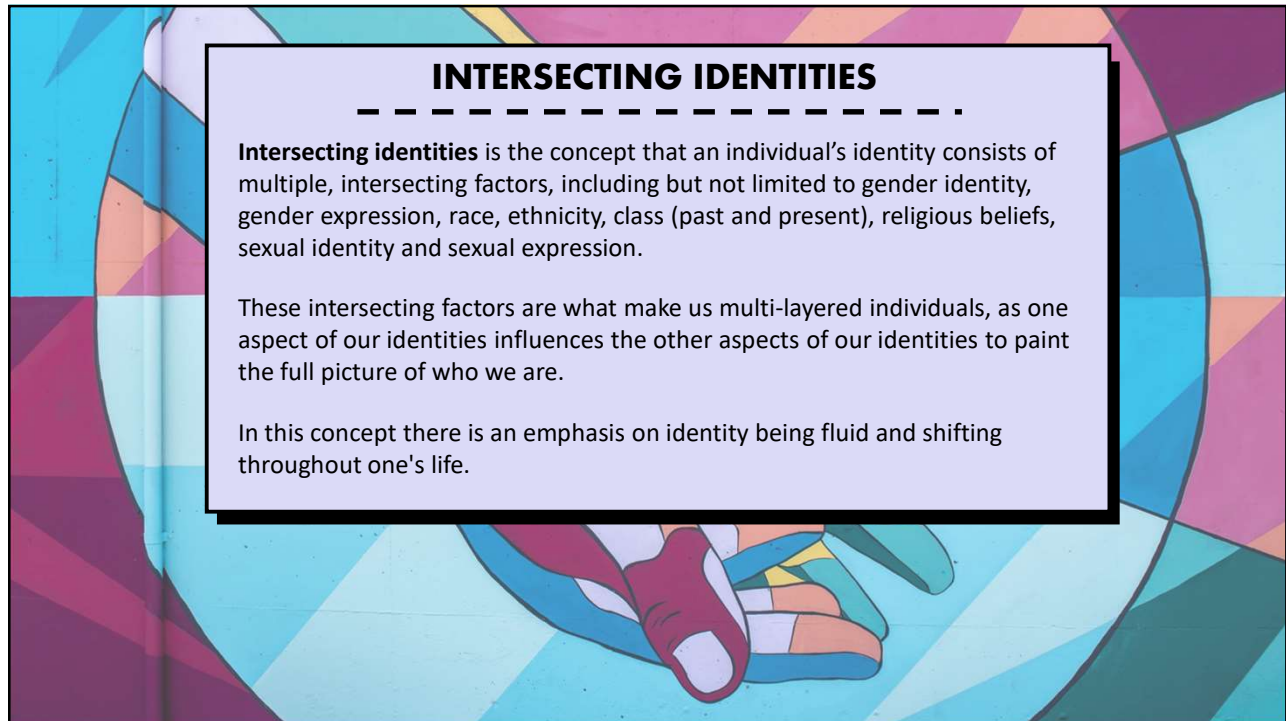
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INTERSECTIONAL CIRCLES

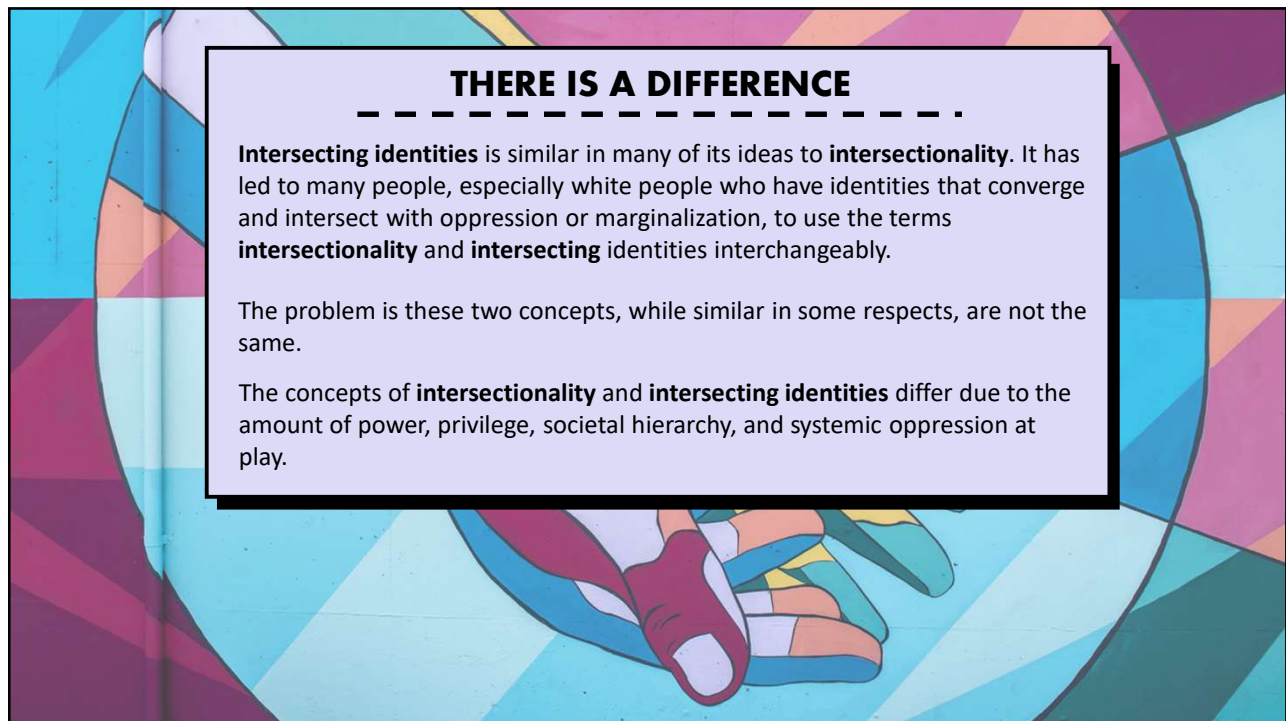
As a collective I would like those of you who feel comfortable with doing so to share your circles of intersectionality. Raise your hand (or share in the chat). Let's touch on the following questions:

- Why did you choose your two primary circles?
- If you identify as white: Which of your identity circles do you believe you have faced the most oppression or hardship for?
- If you identify as a person of color/culture: Which of your identity circles do you believe you have faced the most oppression or hardship for?

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THE DIFFERENCE: AN EXAMPLE

A white cisgender lesbian from an upper middle-class background who is currently living an upper middle-class lifestyle has dealt with a completely different set of systemic oppressors and hate than a Black cisgender lesbian from a lower socioeconomic status who is currently living a middle-class existence.

While they both share some similar aspects of their identities societally, systemically, and historically their oppression and the hate they face are supremely different.

Their experiences navigating the world personally and professionally; the way they are viewed by employers and the public at-large; the ways their ancestors are viewed and talked about in historical accounts; the way the legal system supports or doesn't support the needs and rights of their intersecting communities; their access to education and advancement; all of these things and many more play out in very different ways for a white cis lesbian and a Black cis lesbian.

If the experiences of the two people mentioned above are that vastly different due to systemic, historic, and societal oppression how do you think it is to be a Latinx femme from a Catholic upbringing navigating our society? Or an Asian trans male with a physical disability? Both individuals have a litany of oppressive hurdles to grapple with since their race and the other aspects of their identities that make them who they are being historically and systemically used against them to make their lives and existences that much more difficult and dangerous.

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THEY AIN'T THE SAME

Intersectionality addresses how the intersection of a person's identities is culturally and systemically weaponized to oppress them on multiple fronts and is directly connected to generational trauma.

Intersecting identities are often confused with **intersectionality** by those who have one or more "acceptable"/"presentable" identities that allow them the privilege and space to not have to face the same levels of systemic oppression and hate as others deemed lower in the social caste system.

The conversation about these differences has been coming to the forefront over the past few years as more and more white folk with **intersecting identities** equate their experiences and struggles to be akin to persons of color/culture who are affected by the oppressive states associated with **intersectionality**. This is when we find ourselves playing the "Oppression Olympics."

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OPPRESSION OLYMPICS

"Oppression Olympics" is a term used when two or more groups compete to prove themselves more oppressed than each other.

Competing in the **"Oppression Olympics"** attaches something like a moral dimension to oppression, in which the most oppressed are worthier.

People who participate in **"Oppression Olympics"** tend to ignore the fact that it's possible for multiple groups to be oppressed, and necessary to address all those problems, without choosing a single group to get all the anti-oppression activism.

The **"Oppression Olympics"** also tend to ignore **intersectionality**, except where the existence of multiple degrees of oppression can help an individual participant "win". This is where confusing **intersectionality** with **intersecting identities** can be oppressive and potentially dangerous.

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OPPRESSION OLYMPICS: HOW THIS PLAYS OUT

When white people mistake their **intersecting identities** for **intersectionality**, they are consciously or unconsciously engaging in oppressing persons of color/culture and perpetuating white supremacy.

If you identify as white and you are fighting to prove that you, as a member of the dominant race and dominant culture in a society built for you, by you, are "winning" at the **"Oppression Olympics"** over someone who does not have the rights, privilege, societal acceptance and safeties you possess (even if it's in varying degrees) then you are adding to the societal oppression of that person.

This does not mean that your pain, trauma, and struggles do not have weight or are invalid. This is to say that others also have pain, trauma, and struggles with the added hurdle of having melanated skin.

Your whiteness allows you the to seek and receive support for your mental and emotional well-being and recovery with way less societal stigma than that of a person of color/culture.

Your whiteness allows for you to expect others to give you the benefit of the doubt due to any oppression you have faced.

Persons of color/culture do not have and are rarely afforded the same space for support and understanding that white people who have faced even a modicum of oppression receive. This is evident on all levels: societally, personally and professionally.

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TURNING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

In our workplaces we need to constantly evaluate how intersectionality is or is not being considered in:

- **Our disciplinary policies.** If your organization and/or department is still engaging in disciplining Black womxn who work for you in disproportionate ways due to your perception that they “aren’t professional” while allowing white employees to regularly say and do discriminatory things to others with very few repercussions, then you are contributing to oppressing your employees based on their identities and deeming other identities as more worthy of “wiggle room.”
- **Our approaches to hiring and recruiting.** If your organization hasn’t evaluated your hiring and recruiting strategies in the last 12 months (or ever) then you are likely hiring persons of culture/color and folx from other marginalized groups based on tokenism and singular identities that you’ve deemed as either worthy or that will fulfill a spoken/unspoken quota. This means you are ignoring everything someone could bring to your department and organization and setting new hires of color/culture for failure and doing your organization and the communities it serves a disservice by not engaging with anything other than a singular identity.

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TURNING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

- **Our approaches to retention and succession planning.** If employees of color/culture are not offered opportunities for promotions, opportunities to cross-train and acquire new skills, or even supported in furthering their personal and professional growth with the same level of support white employees who have similar intersections receive then you likely have difficulties retaining persons of color/culture. And if you factor in “disciplinary issues” for your employees of color/culture but never consider the same for your white employees with similar intersections when making promotion-related and opportunity-related decisions then you are weaponizing someone’s identities to be used against them.
- **The people we place in positions of power.** If the people in your organization or department who have the power to make decisions that impact staffing, retention, policy, and the way you support the communities you serve are not culturally competent, empathic, emotionally intelligent, and open to understanding how intersectionality can be weaponized to harm others then your organization or department will continue facing hurdles of exclusion and a lack of diversity and equity that will impact who wants to work with and for your organization and how the public eventually perceives your organization.

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THIS AIN'T JUST ABOUT YOUR EMPLOYER...

Understanding **intersectionality** is more than a workplace exercise. In our personal lives, through our individual lifelong growth and learning, we need to constantly evaluate how **intersectionality** is or is not being considered in every aspect of our interpersonal relationships and interpersonal communications.

We all need to understand that if we are in positions of power in any way, shape, or form, that our personal biases and conscious and unconscious perpetuation of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, transphobic, and/or ableist oppression is being weaponized to harm those who get harmed by society through their identities unless we check ourselves.

If we are not working on being actively anti-racist, feminist, emotionally intelligent, empathetic, culturally competent, and allowing ourselves to be open to learning and atoning for our actions and words that have harmed others who have more hurdles to face than ourselves, then we are contributing to problems, not solutions.

If you are white and still feel the need to prove that you have been oppressed just as much as a person of color/culture whose identities intersect with other forms of oppression, then you are a part of the problem and likely harming people based on their **intersectionality** on a regular basis. Your biases are showing.

We all need to change our mindsets not only around how we view our identities but the identities of others too. We need to not view oppression as a competition, but as societal and cultural hurdles that impact so many of us in disproportionate ways.

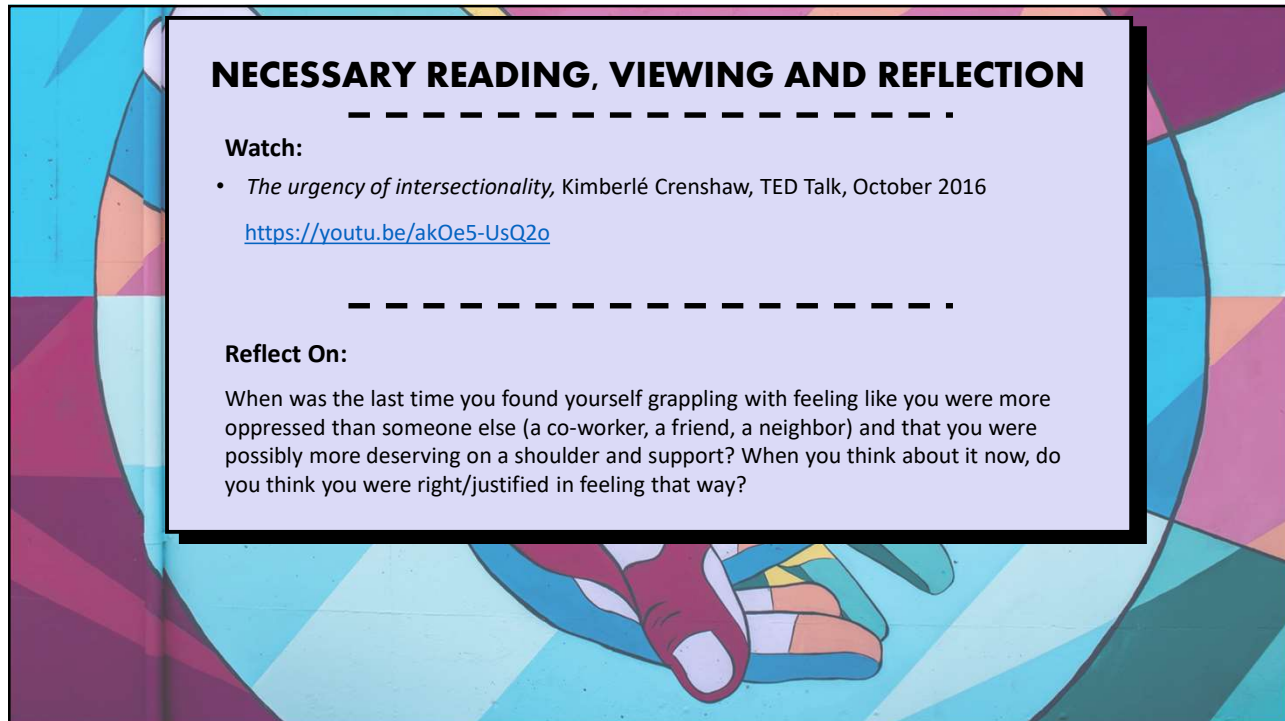
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NECESSARY READING, VIEWING AND REFLECTION

Read:

- *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Kimberle Crenshaw, 1989
<https://tinyurl.com/y6g9znys>
- *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde, compiled 2018
<https://tinyurl.com/yxrqlfmp>
- *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, edited by Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, Thomas, 1996
<https://tinyurl.com/y26435nt>

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NECESSARY READING, VIEWING AND REFLECTION

Watch:

- *The urgency of intersectionality*, Kimberlé Crenshaw, TED Talk, October 2016
<https://youtu.be/akOe5-UsQ2o>

Reflect On:

When was the last time you found yourself grappling with feeling like you were more oppressed than someone else (a co-worker, a friend, a neighbor) and that you were possibly more deserving on a shoulder and support? When you think about it now, do you think you were right/justified in feeling that way?

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

Holla atcha boy on the Interwebs!

 pharoahbolding.com

 @pb_hrpro

 @pharoahbolding

 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/pharoahbolding/>

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