

BOOK REVIEW

Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory

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Patricia Hill Collins's long-awaited monograph on intersectionality does something remarkable. It issues an invitation to form a community: to engage with, and thereby transcend the "definitional dilemmas" (to use Collins's own term) in which the field of intersectionality studies has been mired for the past decade, and to reconstitute intersectionality as a "broad-based, collaborative intellectual and political project with many kinds of social actors" (5). For Collins, the "heterogeneity" of intersectionality "is not a liability, but rather may be one of its greatest strengths" (5): "I take the position that intersectionality is far broader than what most people, including many of its practitioners, imagine it to be. We have yet to fully understand the potential of the constellation of ideas that fall under the umbrella term *intersectionality* as a tool for social change" (2). If, in this community, reaching "consensus" about the meaning of intersectionality "is likely to remain elusive" (23), this book contributes to an approach that grounds intersectional critical social theory in concrete experiences and promotes practices of theorizing that can "accommodate heterogeneous points of view" (23). As such, Collins's "intent is neither to set the story of intersectionality straight . . . nor to defend intersectionality from commodification by academic poachers. Rather, [her] goal is to offer an alternative telling of intersectionality's story that is more closely aligned with the critical traditions of resistant knowledge projects" (124).

Origin stories, conceptual mappings, narratives of "coinage," possessive investments, and academic citation practices have arguably functioned to distort and conceal as much as they have revealed about intersectionality. When narratives of the trajectory of a concept—or a constellation of ideas—take the form of "academic gatekeeping practices" (3), as Collins argues has happened with intersectionality, and citation substitutes for thoughtful—even passionate—engagement with ideas, arguments, and interpretations, the possibilities of forming this community of intersectional praxis recede far from view. Interestingly, it is precisely these gestures of ownership, gentrification, colonization, totalization, and inflation of originality that are encouraged and rewarded by the academic institutions in which we (some of us) produce knowledge about and through intersectionality.

As intersectionality has become the hallmark of twenty-first-century feminisms, reaching into the future from its "mid-twentieth-century history . . . [i]t has taken on a life of its own . . . Intersectionality has not been business as usual—it has proven itself to be scrappy and resilient under difficult conditions" (18). Tracing the genealogy, trajectory, and potentialities of intersectionality in the present conjuncture, the book is

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composed of four parts. In part I, Collins analyzes “three processes that people use to produce intersectionality itself,” which she terms, respectively, “metaphoric, heuristic, and paradigmatic thinking” (24). The spatial metaphor of intersectionality “provided new angles of vision” that enabled theorists to concretize intangible systems of oppression and link them to everyday lived experiences (28), while facilitating intersectionality’s “travel” (31). As a heuristic (a technique for learning about or solving something), intersectionality enabled critique and problematization of the available categories of race/class/gender and functioned as a provisional, integrative concept that could generate new categories (34–35). Finally, intersectionality effected a paradigm shift in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies and in disciplinary fields such as sociology, philosophy, law, psychology, and political science (42–43), away from “conceptualiz[ing] race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nation, and ability as distinct, separate, and disconnected phenomena” and toward observing, analyzing, and theorizing their interconnections and mutual constitution (43). Here, Collins poses the astute question, “[i]s intersectionality itself emerging as a paradigm in its own right?” and if so, how may we turn “the analytical lens back onto intersectionality itself?” (43). Doing just that, Collins identifies six paradigmatic concepts characterizing intersectionality: relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice (44–50).

In addition to framing the issues/debates around intersectionality, and foreshadowing the approach developed throughout the book, in part I Collins examines the other titular concept in *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, namely, critical social theory, posing the following deceptively straightforward questions: what is it? What’s critical about it? And: does intersectionality constitute a critical social theory? She arrives at a dual definition: first, critical theory embodies, practices, and enables critique—following intellectual traditions such as the Frankfurt school, British cultural studies, Francophone social theory, examined in part I, as well as critical race theory, feminist theory, and decolonial knowledge projects, discussed in part II. But also, second, critical theory is characterized by the quality of being “essential, needed, or critical for something to happen” (9). Whether intersectionality fulfills both criteria is, Collins claims, a question asked but left unanswered in the book (9). I would respectfully disagree: Collins’s own parsing of “intersectionality as critical social theory in the making” (81) indicates an affirmative answer. Or, to put it another way (as I will go on to discuss), Collins opens a door through which we are invited to pass, joining a community of praxis that would restore to intersectionality its critical urgency. I found very interesting the discussion of reform versus transformation in relation to intersectionality (81–84). In a sense, this discussion foreshadows (the book was published in 2019) current debates around reform/abolition and the rise of abolitionist feminism in the aftermath of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. I wonder how Collins would rewrite this section today, drawing precisely on the “perspective[s] of people who are subordinated within intersecting power relations” (84) to overcome the impasses and the hegemonic routes established through the quandaries raised in this section.

“The experience of doing intersectionality is praxis, and such praxis informs intersectional theorizing” (12). I sat, and will continue to sit, with this sentence for a very long time. In part II, Collins examines how intersectionality constitutes a “resistant knowledge project” and how it relates to various pathways of intellectual or epistemic resistance, or, as Lucius Outlaw has put it, “philosophizing born of struggle” (quoted on 88). She takes on the nearly impossible task of surveying (a) antiracism—critical race theory, Africana philosophy, racial formation theory, Black liberation theories,

and Black feminism (89–98); (b) feminism—women’s, gender, and sexuality studies; feminist theory; queer theory; trans theory; women of color feminisms; queer of color critique; and white/Western feminism (98–108); (c) decoloniality—postcolonial, Indigenous, and decolonial theories (108–16). Intersectionality is then presented as a distinct “resistant knowledge project,” which draws upon the aforementioned and “places the ideas of so many discourses . . . in dialogue”; Collins argues its relation to its “genealogy” is what makes intersectional “critical theorizing . . . especially complex” (120).

In part III, Collins asks, “what conception of social action as a way of knowing might intersectionality develop for its theoretical toolkit?” (13). Here, experience, community, and solidarity are explored as fundamentals of an intersectional approach, which is not satisfied with merely describing the social world, but works to change it. As Collins explains, “experiences of oppression” are the “catalyst” to undertake the “tough job of theorizing . . . for people penalized by colonialism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and similar systems of power” (12). Putting intersectionality into conversation with the traditions of Black feminist thought and American pragmatism, Collins draws three lessons: first, “the substance of experience matters in relation to diagnosing social problems and in figuring out ways to address them” (186); second, “a more sophisticated construct of community might influence intersectionality’s interpretive communities and how such communities might facilitate intersectionality’s creative social action” (186); and third, “intersectionality’s ideas come from people’s self-reflexive experiences within the intersecting power relations of their social world” (188).

The invitation to a heterogeneous community is motivated by a desire for social justice. What might it mean for us to feel this *burning desire*, and to take up this invitation to collectively constitute intersectionality-as-community? This question can help us shift intersectionality studies from a set of safe, if interesting and relatively critical, ideas to an engaged—insurrectionary, even—resistant social praxis with the transformative goal of dismantling systems of oppression—for which this book makes a compelling case. And, indeed, we can answer this invitation only in and through collective praxis. Understanding intersectionality as critical social theory produced and contested in praxis in a heterogeneous community means that the struggle over meaning internal to the community—using reflexive “strategies of internal critical analysis” (120)—is seen as constitutive and not detrimental to the integrity of this community: “community is never a finished thing but is always in the making,” Collins tells us.

A more dynamic, future-oriented understanding of community creates space for imagining something different than the present and a worldview that critically analyzes existing social arrangements. In this sense, participating in building a community is simultaneously political (negotiating differences of power within a group), dynamic (negotiating practices that balance individual and collective goals), and aspirational. The challenge of sustaining this dynamic conception of community, however, lies in finding ways to negotiate contradictions. (185)

Moreover, Collins is clear that intersectional praxis, or synthesis of reflection and action, cannot be accomplished in “homogeneous theoretical communities” such as universities, invested with epistemic power (128), including the power to determine who counts as a knower: “academic communities of inquiry,” Collins reminds us, “draw upon taken-for-granted ideas about race, class, gender, sexuality, and similar categories to evaluate ideas in light of the people who raise them. These categories . . . align with prevailing hierarchies that privilege and derogate entire categories of people as

capable of doing social theory” (130). Indeed, the struggles over the meaning(s) of intersectionality reveal these deep-seated structures of epistemic power, and the extent to which people (academics) privileged by them seek to undermine intersectionality’s normative politics by detaching the concept of its formative relationship to identity politics and standpoint epistemology (136–42). Intersectionality turns the gaze on power, including that exercised by practitioners of intersectionality itself, as well as those who invoke it, thereby stepping into an incipient community of meaning-making and social transformation (whether they intended to or not). Thus, “to tell [intersectionality’s] story without attending to power relations misreads its purpose and undermines its practice” (143).

Part IV examines three core principles (relationality, social justice, and ethics) in a “speculative and provisional way” in order to “sharpen intersectionality’s critical edge” (226). By “[s]harpening intersectionality’s critical edge,” Collins means “developing agreed-upon understandings, however provisional, of its core constructs and guiding principles” (15). She observes that “[u]pon its entry into the academy, intersectionality had a strong critical edge, one that reflected its ties to resistant knowledge projects and its commitment to decolonizing knowledges” (15). Yet, “uncritical” defenses or celebrations of intersectionality “as a finished critical social theory” have undermined its “critical potential” (120). Importantly, Collins reminds us that “[c]ritical theorizing means taking a position while recognizing the provisional nature of the positions we take. It means being self-reflexive not only about other people’s behavior but also about one’s own praxis” (17). In this section, Collins analyzes three modalities of relationality: addition (227–32), articulation (232–40), and co-formation (241–49) in order to arrive at “a provisional framework for describing relationality within intersectionality” (250). Controversially, perhaps, Collins argues that all three are “equally useful forms of relational thinking; one does not signify a better approach to intersectionality than the others” (250). So, although intersectionality is often presented as a critique of additive models of oppression and identity, in particular—models that intersectionality is taken to have supplanted—Collins counters this by rejecting “a linear narrative of progress from seemingly simple to ever-higher forms of achievement” (250). Finally, *via negativa*, Collins restores ethics and social justice as inherent and not merely contingent commitments of intersectionality by contrasting intersectionality to an ideology that despite being relational, obviously lacks these commitments: namely, eugenics (254–85). The conclusion she draws reiterates a central insight of the book: “the meaning of ideas is not intrinsic to the ideas themselves. Rather, it lies in how people use those ideas, not solely through intellectual prowess or political action, but also through how their ethical commitments inform their ideas and actions” (285).

Needless to say, as this brief review suggests, like Collins’s earlier work—her germinal *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Collins 1990) or her previous book, co-authored with Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Collins and Bilge 2016), now in its second edition and translated into multiple languages—*Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* is a theoretical page-turner. Indeed, the book “raises more questions than it answers” (17); for precisely this reason, it is an ideal companion text for graduate seminars on intersectionality; for practitioners of intersectionality who wish to deepen their praxis; and for academic readers who could benefit from the commitments to self-reflexivity, intellectual heterogeneity, ethics, and social justice, which Collins aptly and deftly restores to intersectionality.

For me, *Intersectionality as Critical Theory* was a companion during the early years of the ongoing pandemic: I read and reread the book, as I tried to find the wherewithal

to craft a review that would do it justice. This was especially challenging, as I recovered from multiple infections; dealt with the longer-term effects of COVID-19; tried to adjust to new (for me) conditions of social isolation and lockdown; and grieved the loss we have collectively experienced—and with which we have barely begun to grapple. Intersectional praxis is ever more critical if we are to collectively confront the intersecting crises of environmental catastrophe; ubiquitous structural, institutional, and interpersonal violence; human and more-than-human lives consigned to debility and death at differential velocities. These crises, wrought by interlocking systems of oppression—racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, bordered nations—and the unprecedented global, existential threat of which they are harbingers, coincide with a juncture or crossroads at which intersectionality finds itself: potentially a community of transformative praxis, if it can be wrested from the narrow, private interest of commodified knowledge-production within an increasingly obsolete, fortified academy. For the companionship her book gave me, and for all the ways Patricia Hill Collins has awakened my critical consciousness and nourished my *burning desire* for social justice over the years through the page, I would like to extend to her my heartfelt gratitude.

References

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