

Patricia  
Hill  
Collins

# Intersectionality

AS CRITICAL  
SOCIAL  
THEORY

Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory

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# **Intersectionality**

as Critical Social Theory

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**PATRICIA HILL COLLINS**

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,**  
Eunice Randolph Hill and Albert Hill

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# Introduction

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Intersectionality came of age in the twentieth century during a period of immense social change. Anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; the emergence of a global women's movement; civil rights movements in multicultural democracies; the end of the Cold War; and the defeat of apartheid in South Africa all signaled the end of long-standing forms of domination. It was clear that deeply entrenched social inequalities would not disappear overnight, nor would the social problems that they engendered. What was different was a new way of looking at social inequalities and possibilities for social change. Seeing the social problems caused by colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism as interconnected provided a new vantage on the possibilities for social change. Many people came to hope for something better, imagining new possibilities for their own lives and those of others.

Intersectionality draws from and carries this legacy. What were once diffuse ideas about the interconnectedness of people, social problems, and ideas are now central to intersectionality as a recognized form of critical inquiry and praxis. Yet, as intersectionality has matured, both it and the world around it have changed. Decolonization has morphed into neocolonialism, feminism confronts a deeply entrenched misogyny, civil rights flounders on the shoals of a color-blind racism, Cold War thinking persists in proxy form in undeclared wars, and racial apartheid has reformulated both within and across national borders. Social inequality seems as durable as ever. Within these new social conditions, new social problems complement long-standing ones from the past. Change seems to be everywhere, yet not

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in the way that intersectionality's initial advocates imagined it would unfold. Democratic institutions that once offered such promise for realizing ideals of freedom, social justice, equality, and human rights are increasingly hollowed out from within by leaders who seem more committed to holding on to power than to serving the people. Such big ideals can seem less relevant now—quaint notions that were useful during past centuries but perhaps less attainable now. Given the scope and durability of social inequality and the social problems that it engenders, it's hard not to become disillusioned. How do people engage in social action during times of such change such as our own? Conversely, which ideas will prove to be most useful in shaping such actions?

This brings me to why I wrote this particular book, and why I decided to finish it now. I see important parallels between the challenges that confronted intellectual-activists who initially contributed to intersectionality's emergence and those of today. In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 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. As a discourse, intersectionality bundles together ideas from disparate places, times, and perspectives, enabling people to share points of view that formerly were forbidden, outlawed, or simply obscured. Yet because ideas in and of themselves do not foster social change, intersectionality is not just a set of ideas. Instead, because they inform social action, intersectionality's ideas have consequences in the social world.

Intersectionality is well on its way to becoming a critical social theory that can address contemporary social problems and the social changes needed to solve them. But it can do so only if its practitioners simultaneously understand and cultivate intersectionality as a *critical* social theory. A form of critical inquiry and praxis, intersectionality has not yet realized its potential as a critical social theory, nor has it adequately democratized its own processes for producing knowledge. But the foundation is there. Intersectionality possesses a knowledge base; a series of ongoing questions; a mass of engaged, interdisciplinary practitioners; and traditions of praxis that collectively inform its theoretical possibilities. Intersectionality is poised to develop an independent theoretical space that might guide its ongoing questions and concerns. Yet without serious self-reflection, intersectionality could easily become just another social theory that implicitly upholds the status quo. If practitioners do not pursue intersectionality's critical theoretical possi-

bilities, it could become just another form of, as a friend of mine put it, “academic bullshit” that joins an arsenal of projects whose progressive and radical potential has waned. It could become just another idea that came and went.

Critical social theory sits in a sweet spot between critical analysis and social action, with theories that can cultivate the strongest links between the two proving to be the most resilient and useful. Developing intersectionality as critical social theory involves two challenges. On the one hand, the time is right to look within the parameters of intersectionality with an eye toward clarifying its critical theoretical possibilities. On the other hand, time may be running out for advancing intersectionality as a critical social theory in the academy. If intersectionality does not clarify its own critical theoretical project, others will do so for it.

### **Why Critical Social Theory? Intersectionality at the Crossroads**

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, I use intersectionality as a lens for examining how critical analysis and social action might inform one another. I want to know how and why intersectionality might become a critical social theory that keeps critical analysis and social action in play. Within the academy, intersectionality is doing substantial work within research, teaching, and administration, yet without agreement about what it actually is. Within scholarly literature, intersectionality has been conceptualized as everything from a paradigm, concept, framework, heuristic device, and theory (Collins and Bilge 2016). In my assessment, this heterogeneity has thus far been a good thing, inviting participation in building intersectionality from many different perspectives, thereby signaling intersectionality’s dynamic nature. The scope of work that now exists under the umbrella term *intersectionality* provides a promising foundation for specifying intersectionality’s distinctive questions, concerns, and analyses.

At the same time, intersectionality’s tenure in the academy has brought it face to face with academic gatekeeping practices concerning social theory. When it comes to social theory, much more is at stake for intersectionality within academic debates than as to whether Marxism is really dead or why poststructuralism is not critical enough. Social theory is not just about the ideas in an argument; it’s also about the practices of theorizing that produce those ideas. The meaning of a particular social theory lies not

just in its words but also in how its ideas are created and used. As a maturing field of study, intersectionality needs to evaluate the criteria and practices that inform its theorizing. Western social theories have long been placed in service to various systems of domination. It is important not just to read what theories say but also to understand how social theories work within society, especially if they claim to be *critical* social theories.

When it comes to critical social theory, intersectionality stands at a crossroads. To me, characterizing intersectionality as a “social theory” without serious critical analysis of what that means is both premature and problematic. The increasing and seemingly cavalier characterization of intersectionality as a social theory within intersectional scholarship resembles the initial rush toward intersectionality itself. In the 1990s, many people took up the ideas of intersectionality within a relatively short period of time. This period of discovery was initially energizing. Yet as intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis has matured, and continues to be discovered by even more people, its advocates must become more self-reflective about intersectionality’s objectives, analyses, and practices. Specifically, intersectionality needs to find ways to adjudicate often competing perspectives on what it is, what it should be doing, and why it should be doing it. Having so many people claim intersectionality and use it in such disparate ways creates definitional dilemmas for intersectionality (Collins 2015). Leaving the theoretical dimensions of intersectionality unexamined only heightens these dilemmas. Without analyzing how its own critical analyses and social actions are interrelated, intersectionality may become trapped in its own crossroads, pulled in multiple directions and drowning in ideas. Without sustained self-reflection, intersectionality will be unable to help anyone grapple with social change, including changes within its own praxis.

In this book, I take the position that social theory constitutes a particular kind of knowledge. Social theories aim to *explain* the social world, offering interpretations for how and why things are the way they are as well as what they might or might not become. Because theories explain the social world, they affect the social world, even though their influence may not be apparent. Some social theories have the power to oppress, and do so quite effectively, without most people realizing the power of theory in maintaining an unjust social order. Other social theories have sparked considerable social action, providing critical explanations of the social world that catalyzed rebellions small and large. Social theories justify or challenge existing social orders. Within this universe of social theory, critical social theory both explains and criticizes existing social inequalities, with an eye toward creating

possibilities for change. Stated differently, critical social theories aim to reform what is in the hope of transforming it into something else.

Critical social theory is also a particular kind of knowledge because it focuses on the social world. The social world is one that is created by human beings and changed by us. For critical social theory, this focus on the social world informs a vocabulary of interrelated terms—namely, social inequality, social problems, social order, social justice, and social change. For all of these terms, it is important to remember that without people interacting with one another, there is no social world. For critical social theories, understanding and changing the social world is the primary object of investigation. These analyses deepen understanding of the social world but are not substitutes for it.

The distinction between critical social theory and theorizing is also important for this book. Understanding theorizing as a process of explaining the social world and social theory as the product of critical analysis democratizes knowledge creation. Elites are not the only ones who theorize. Many everyday people offer compelling explanations of their social worlds. For example, in previous work, I examined Black feminist thought as an example of critical social theory that did not come from elites (Collins 1998a; 2000). Educated academics are not the only ones who produce critical social theory, but they are the ones who are more likely to claim it and benefit from it. Yet wherever we work, both inside and outside academia, those of us with literacy, education, and opportunities cannot squander these scarce resources by seeing our intellectual production as our personal property to hoard for our own benefit. My experiences as a social studies teacher in primary and middle schools; as a college professor teaching Africana studies, sociology, and social theory; as a scholar writing about these issues over several decades and reading the exciting work by up-and-coming scholar-activists have convinced me of the importance of ideas, analyses, and critical social theory. Scholar-activists in Baltimore, Soweto, São Paulo, both Birmingham (U.S. and U.K.), Vancouver, Havana, Auckland, and Istanbul do intellectual work in very different environments. They may never meet one another face to face, yet they work on remarkably similar social problems. Significantly, they seek compelling, complex analyses of how colonialism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and neoliberal capitalism, either singularly or in combination, inform their realities. Intersectionality is a broad-based, collaborative intellectual and political project with many kinds of social actors. Its heterogeneity is not a liability, but rather may be one of its greatest strengths.

## Overview of the Book

*Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* introduces and develops core concepts and guiding principles of what it will take to develop intersectionality as a critical social theory. I do not detail what intersectionality as critical social theory actually is. Rather, I develop a set of conceptual tools for how we might move intersectionality closer to becoming a critical social theory. In other words, this book provides a provisional foundation for thinking about intersectionality as a critical social theory that is under construction.

I recognize that this book, like intersectionality, covers a broad range of material. In order to visualize the progression of my main arguments, I have included a detailed table of contents in the Appendix that shows the overall architecture of the book. I include this outline as a navigational tool for seeing how the argument is sequenced and to help you see the scope of the overall argument. Please return to this outline as you read; it should help show you where you are in the text. As you can see from the scope of the outline in the Appendix, you might be very familiar with some subjects and unaware of others. For example, you might be familiar with feminist theory but know little about American pragmatism, have solid grasp of epistemology but be unfamiliar with Black feminism, or be aware of the importance of critical thinking to cognitive psychology and education but be less familiar with the history of eugenics.

Many people find social theory to be off-putting, accusing it of being overly abstract and irrelevant. Whereas the theorist sees specialty language as important for explaining complex ideas, laypeople might experience such language as exclusionary. The issue is that theorists and laypeople alike possess specialty language that reflects complex experiences and different points of view. Recognizing this dilemma, I had to find a way to write for a broad readership. My solution is to teach you what I need you to know so that you can grasp the abstractions of the arguments in this book. That decision made this book extremely difficult to write, but necessary.

As you read the book, keep in mind that *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, like intersectionality itself, includes a range of topics, themes, theories, and arguments that do not normally go together. This book requires a different way of reading, one where you imagine yourself as part of an interpretive community of people whose areas of expertise differ dramatically from your own. I've written chapters, and in some cases, sections of chapters, so that they can be read as freestanding essays that are accessible to readers from varying backgrounds. As you read, keep in mind that



this book is written in the intersectional space of placing different ideas in dialogue. My goal is to speak to a heterogeneous readership without compromising the integrity of the arguments presented here. Working with intersectionality itself is like that.

Organizationally, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* is divided into four parts that provide conceptual tools for intersectionality's theoretical construction. Part I identifies some basic vocabulary for bringing a range of social actors to the table of theory-building. A sense of the scope of what counts as intersectionality among its practitioners (chapter 1) and what counts as critical social theory among social theorists (chapter 2) introduces these often disparate interpretive communities to one another. Part II focuses on intellectual resistance, an important dimension of intersectionality's critical mandate. Intersectionality has ties to multiple resistant knowledges, many of which serve as the source of its ideas and practices (chapter 3), and it also must attend to how epistemic power affects the limits and possibility of its own intellectual resistance (chapter 4). Part III analyzes social action as a way of knowing as an important aspect of theorizing intersectionality. How to conceptualize experience and social action in the context of community (chapter 5) and how social action might inform intersectionality's definitional boundaries (chapter 6) constitute important dimensions of intersectional theorizing. Part IV tackles two taken-for-granted core constructs within intersectionality, arguing that intersectionality as critical social theory must self-reflexively analyze each one. Relationality is a core theme within intersectionality that needs critical analysis (chapter 7), and intersectionality's commitment to social justice can no longer be assumed—it must be constructed (chapter 8).

Make no mistake: *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* was challenging for me to write and it will probably be challenging for you to read. With so much at stake, especially during our current period of change, I see no better way to write it. I've done my best to make the complex arguments in this book accessible. You will have to do your best to interpret what the argument presented here means to you.

## **Part I: Framing the Issues—Intersectionality and Critical Social Theory**

When it comes to intersectionality's theoretical contours, it is important not to conflate the *ideal* of intersectionality as critical social theory with its current reality. Intersectionality is one of those fields in which so many

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people like the idea of intersectionality itself and therefore think they understand the field as well. In actuality, intersectionality is far broader than most people imagine, including those of us who have studied it for some time. I have trouble wrapping my mind around the scope of what now appears from a simple literature search of the term *intersectionality*. The copious body of scholarship that uses this term and related terminology—such as *race*, *class*, and *gender*—provides a wide array of material for mapping intersectionality as a field of inquiry and praxis. When it comes to intersectionality’s content, there’s almost too much material to categorize. Sufficient scholarship now exists to clarify important dimensions of intersectionality’s cognitive architecture for critical social theory (Collins and Bilge 2016).

Getting a better sense of intersectionality itself requires a closer look at intersectionality’s internal dynamics. When scholars, activists, or practitioners say that their project is “intersectional” or that they are “doing intersectionality,” what do they mean? In chapter 1, “Intersectionality as Critical Inquiry,” I examine the cognitive underpinnings of intersectionality. I investigate three dimensions of how people *use* intersectionality to examine the social world—namely, as a metaphor, as a heuristic, and as a paradigm. I argue that these characteristic uses of intersectionality provide a conceptual foundation for intersectionality’s theoretical development. My goal is to specify the critical thinking tools that underlie intersectionality’s internal practices as a way to introduce intersectionality as a critical theory in the making. How might intersectionality’s practitioners build on this cognitive foundation to develop intersectionality’s theoretical potential? In chapter 1, I also introduce important premises concerning intersectionality as critical social theory, which I develop throughout the book. For one, because intersectionality’s scope is so broad, it is situated in an ongoing tension between conceptions of social theory within the social sciences and within interpretive fields such as philosophy and the humanities. The broader understanding of social theory that people have in mind when they use intersectionality reflects these tensions. These distinctive understandings of social theory itself also influence people’s perceptions of whether intersectionality is a social theory and their evaluation of its status. For another, there is a significant distinction between the content of social theory and the processes of doing social theory. Stated differently, social theory is a body of knowledge that explains the social world, and theorizing is a process or way of working that produces social theory. Developing intersectionality as a critical social theory requires attending to both.

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These distinctions between how the humanities or the social sciences define social theory, and between the content of social theory and processes of theorizing that create that content are both important. Yet significantly, neither of these aspects of social theory is inherently critical. The humanities and the social sciences contain social theories that have alternately upheld the status quo, criticized it, or both. Similarly, there is nothing inherently critical about the content of any given social theory and the processes of doing it. As a critical social theory in the making, intersectionality has a stake in clarifying what being critical means for its own project. In chapter 2, “What’s Critical about Critical Social Theory?,” I analyze how varying perceptions of the meaning of being critical have similarly varied implications for intersectionality. I examine three particular sites of critical social theory from different national traditions and periods of time: critical theory of the Frankfurt school (1930s–1940s), British cultural studies (1970s–1980s), and strands of Francophone social theory (1950s–1960s). When it comes to critical social theory, no one model, template, recipe, or set of rules can be followed as inherently critical. Critical social theory emerges within a specific context and speaks to that particular context.

The analysis of these particular sites of critical social theory identifies two important aspects of being critical. The first is familiar: critical theory as criticism or as criticizing some idea, practice, or behavior. Criticizing something is a common meaning of being critical. But I also introduce a less familiar sense of being critical—namely, an entity that is essential, needed, or critical for something to happen. For example, water is critical in sustaining life, and love may be critical for human development. Can ideas such as intersectionality serve a similar critical purpose in the social world? I raise this question early in the book, but leave it unanswered.

Together, these opening chapters explore two important aspects of developing intersectionality as critical social theory: one involving intersectionality’s internal dynamics and the other, intersectionality’s relationship with established critical social theories. Looking within its own practices and to the practices of others frames the broader issues that inform intersectionality’s critical inquiry. Moreover, not only do chapters 1 and 2 introduce intersectionality itself as well as selected theoretical traditions with academia; when read together, these chapters juxtapose the openness of intersectionality, as an emerging theoretical endeavor, to established traditions of theoretical canon-building in the academy. Just as there is not yet any agreed upon way of doing intersectionality, the traditions of critical social theory

surveyed here illustrate that there is no one way of thinking and doing critical social theory. Yet they also trouble the academic landscape by illustrating how some critical social theories are more widely accepted than others. In essence, how critical or resistant can critical social theories be within the contours of academia if we continue to think of theorizing as a purely academic endeavor? What possibilities for resistant knowledge, especially critical social theory, are generated or precluded by this assumption?

## **Part II: How Power Matters—Intersectionality and Intellectual Resistance**

Many intellectual histories overlook the importance of power relations in shaping the questions, assumptions, knowledge, and impact of a given social theory. In part II of the book, I analyze power relations not by emphasizing domination, but rather by developing the concept of intellectual resistance and exploring intersectionality's connections to it. Here I investigate intersectionality's ties to intellectual resistance as a two-pronged endeavor. Intersectionality itself can be seen as a knowledge project of resistance, one in which critical analysis underpins its intellectual resistance. Intersectionality also confronts epistemological challenges to its intellectual resistance. Particular knowledge projects are sites of intellectual resistance, and critical social theory is a particular form of intellectual resistance.

A far broader political and intellectual landscape shapes intersectionality's theorizing than that provided by academic social theories. Gender, race, ethnicity, nation, sexuality, ability, and age are not just categories designed to make intersectionality more user-friendly for academic research. Rather, these terms also reference important resistant knowledge traditions among subordinated peoples who oppose the social inequalities and social injustices that they experience. Such projects aim to address the deep-seated concerns of people who are subordinated within domestic and global expressions of racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and similar systems of political domination and economic exploitation. Whatever the form of oppression they experience—race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, ethnicity, and nation—subordinated groups have a vested interest in resisting it.

Chapter 3, “Intersectionality and Resistant Knowledge Projects,” examines how critical race studies, feminism, and decolonial knowledge projects illuminate different dimensions of intellectual resistance. Critical inquiry that begins within the assumptions of resistant knowledge projects often has

access to a more expansive repertoire of critical ideas than that which originates within the framing assumptions of academic social theory. I selected these three sites of resistant knowledge production because they speak to important issues concerning critical theorizing, intellectual resistance, and intersectionality. All three projects have a presence both inside and outside the academy. All have histories of political activism that recognize the importance of theorizing via praxis. None by itself is a critical social theory in the sense of the critical theories in academia discussed in chapter 2. But by demonstrating varying forms of intellectual resistance, all three make important yet distinct contributions to intersectionality's theoretical project.

Critical race theory, broadly defined, has long challenged the racial theories manufactured within academic disciplines in Europe and North America, drawing primarily on Black diasporic and indigenous resistant knowledge traditions to do so. By advancing a hard-hitting critique of the gender bias within Western knowledge, academic feminism has made real headway in gaining visibility as a bona fide field of study. Yet while feminist theory has garnered increasing legitimation as a critical social theory, feminism writ large continues to confront deep-seated misogyny across many social institutions. Despite these challenges, feminism models a useful form of self-reflexive critical analysis about its own practices. Decolonial knowledge projects have become increasingly visible, especially as the critical edge of postcolonial studies has seemingly waned within the academy. Resistant knowledge projects of decolonization demonstrate a critical response to both the limitations of an academic discourse that seemingly represents them and the ongoing yet changing contours of contemporary neocolonial relationships.

In chapter 4, "Intersectionality and Epistemic Resistance," I examine how epistemic resistance is vital to opposing racism, sexism, class exploitation, and similar social phenomena. In making a case for the necessity of epistemic resistance for intersectionality, I focus on epistemology and methodology within academic venues. Together, epistemology and methodology influence different aspects of knowledge production. On the one hand, intersectionality is situated *within* broader epistemological frameworks that regulate definitions of what counts as theory and how theories will be evaluated. Through these definitional and evaluative processes, epistemologies exercise power in regulating social theories. Epistemology is implicated in power relations; it is not a passive bystander during the social construction of knowledge. On the other hand, intersectionality draws upon methodologies as conduits for critical theorizing that can uphold or upend epistemic

power. But it cannot uncritically use existing methodologies; rather, it may need to develop its signature methods. Toward this end, I introduce dialogical engagement as a guiding framework for intersectionality's methodology, one that I also use throughout this book.

Together, these chapters examine various aspects of intellectual resistance. Understanding intersectionality as a critical social theory in the making requires a more expansive set of analytical tools that takes both its ideas and its practices into account. Within the academy, political and intellectual resistance occurs in the terrain of epistemology and methodology, areas long seen as unbiased and therefore apolitical. Yet epistemology and methodology both speak directly to intersectionality as a critical theory in the making. They do not stand outside politics but are directly implicated in developing or suppressing knowledges of resistance. How might intersectionality's social theories reflect its methodological practices and vice versa? The experience of doing intersectionality is praxis, and such praxis informs intersectional theorizing.

### **Part III: Theorizing Intersectionality—Social Action as a Way of Knowing**

As the traditions of resistant knowledge surveyed in this book suggest, social action and experience have been important interdependent dimensions of theorizing advanced by subordinated groups. For people penalized by colonialism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and similar systems of power, experiences with oppression are often the catalyst for critically analyzing these systems and taking action within them. Experiences provide a reason why people are willing to take on the tough job of theorizing. Yet taking informed social action, the hallmark of analyzing experience, has also been an important dimension of critical theorizing. This notion of learning by doing suggests that thinking and acting are not separate endeavors, but rather are recursive. Moreover, experience and social action are both tied to social context—they constitute ways to ground theorizing within power relations, not as a reaction to power, but as social action in response to power relations.

Within Western social theory, social actions and the experiences they engender are often interpreted as data to be included within existing social theories or bias to be excluded from them. Experience is not a valued way of knowing, and theorizing through social action may not be seen as theorizing at all. These epistemological assumptions devalue important

theoretical tools that catalyze and shape resistant knowledge itself. Groups that advance critical race studies, feminism, and decolonial studies, among others, confront accusations of being too particularistic both in invoking their own experiences in analyzing the world and in focusing on oppression and domination. Their actions to change the social world do not make them more knowledgeable but rather more biased. This epistemological framework has important implications for intersectionality. One outcome is that intersectionality has been criticized for being too closely associated with the ideas and interests of women, Black people, poor people, and people in subordinated groups. Another is that these criticisms work to limit intersectionality's theoretical possibilities because they constrain important tools for theorizing within resistant knowledge traditions. Moreover, these assumptions work to shrink the pool of people who are deemed credible to do social theory in the first place, as well as the ideas that such people bring to the process of theorizing.

Methodologically, intersectionality suggests something far more radical about the process of theorizing than quiet contemplation by a lone scholar who is removed from the social world. Rather than rejecting experience and social action as dimensions of its critical theorizing, I suggest that intersectionality would do better to redefine social action as a way of knowing that, because it valorizes experience, potentially strengthens intersectional theorizing. Developing an argument for how and why social action and experience constitute important dimensions of intersectionality's critical theorizing is the best way to respond to intersectionality's critics. Toward that end, I ask, What conception of social action as a way of knowing might intersectionality develop for its theoretical toolkit? How might experience enhance intersectional theorizing?

Chapters 5 and 6 provide different approaches to and different lenses on these connections among experience, social action as a way of knowing, and intersectionality's critical theorizing. In chapter 5, "Intersectionality, Experience, and Community," I place Black feminist thought and American pragmatism in dialogue in order to shed light on two current controversies confronting intersectionality. One concerns how experiences constitute an important, albeit overlooked, tool of critical theorizing. Because experiences occur in the social world, they are windows to that world. Experiences can be theorized just as thoroughly as books, movies, and texts. Individuals have experiences, yet the meaning they make of them stems from their placement within the families, groups, nations, and other collectivities that make up their social world. The texts of discourse analysis cannot talk back to theorists.

But people who are the subjects of study by researchers often do, drawing upon their experiences as a source of knowledge. The other controversy concerns the need for a vocabulary with which to analyze the social world as more than a constellation of individuals. Here, social action comes into play because the social world is always under construction both by individuals and by social groups. The construct of community as a way of understanding collective identity and collective action, especially within and across intersectionality's heterogeneous communities of inquiry, is especially helpful. Black feminism and American pragmatism are very different discourses, yet reading them together provides complementary perspectives on experience, on community, and, by implication, on social action as a way of knowing.

In Chapter 6, "Intersectionality and the Question of Freedom," I investigate how rethinking social action as a way of knowing might inform intersectionality's critical theorizing. The chapter examines the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) and Pauli Murray (1910–1985), two important feminist intellectuals whose engagement with existentialism, African American social and political thought, or both provide distinctive standpoints on their understandings of freedom. Placing the ideas of two feminist intellectuals in dialogue illuminates how their respective analyses of oppression and freedom draw upon experience and social action as ways of knowing. Each intellectual's analysis of freedom has implications for intersectionality's emphasis on the recursive relationship of ideas and social action. Beauvoir is known for her existentialist analysis of freedom, yet despite being familiar with oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, Beauvoir never advanced an intersectional analysis of oppression or freedom. Murray's life course and intellectual production took a different path. Her increasingly sophisticated analyses of oppression and freedom were honed within a recursive space between analysis of and struggles for freedom. Murray's intellectual and political work illustrates the process of working dialogically over time with race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation in crafting an intellectual and political agenda. Because Murray's intellectual framework did not come finished, her engaged social action suggests a sustained intellectual journey that serves as a template for intersectional theorizing.

Together, these two chapters reiterate two important methodological dimensions of intersectionality that are introduced in earlier chapters and run throughout the book. One theme concerns the significance of dialogical engagement for intersectional theorizing: for chapter 5, placing Black feminist thought and American pragmatism in dialogue to rethink experience and social action, and for chapter 6, placing the ideas of Beauvoir and Murray in



dialogue as a pathway to theorizing oppression and freedom. Together, these chapters demonstrate the importance of dialogical engagement for intersectional theorizing.

The other methodological theme concerns the importance of broadening intersectionality's context of discovery by making sure that intersectionality builds inclusive communities of inquiry. In earlier chapters, I looked to discourses that are outside intersectionality's canon—namely, recognized critical social theories and resistant knowledge projects—in search of ideas that might contribute to intersectionality's theoretical development. In chapters 5 and 6, by bringing Black feminist thought and Pauli Murray as a Black feminist intellectual-activist to the center of analysis, I demonstrate the potential benefits of broadening intersectionality's context of discovery and its communities of practice.

#### **Part IV: Sharpening Intersectionality's Critical Edge**

Intersectionality has flourished because its practitioners share certain core constructs and guiding premises. But can it continue to flourish without sustained self-reflection on its own foundational ideas and practices? Intersectionality as a critical social theory in the making cannot take any of its previous accomplishments for granted. Upon 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 within academic venues. Yet how critical is intersectionality now? It's no longer sufficient to proclaim that intersectionality advances cutting-edge critical analysis. As a maturing discourse, intersectionality must begin to specify the terms of its own practice, not defensively in response to its critics, but affirmatively via sustained self-reflection about its paradigmatic premises and methodological practices. Sharpening intersectionality's critical edge requires developing agreed-upon understandings, however provisional, of its core constructs and guiding principles.

Relationality and social justice constitute two core constructs that uncritically circulate within intersectionality. Because they are ever-present and taken-for-granted assumptions, they are not necessarily analyzed or critically evaluated; rather, they shape scholarship in and the practice of intersectionality.

Relationality is an essential core construct for intersectionality itself. There would be no intersectionality without relationality: focusing on relationships *among* entities constitutes a defining feature of intersectionality.

Yet what kind of relationality does intersectionality as critical social theory need? Thinking about relationality also has important implications for intersectionality's working hypothesis of the relational nature of power relations. The premise that race, gender, class, and other systems of power mutually construct one another now functions as a taken-for-granted truism within intersectionality. Yet where is the evidence that intersectionality yields better explanations of power relations than other social theories? The theme of relationality also weaves throughout this book, appearing alternately as a framework for dialogical engagement among discourses and communities of inquiry, and as a methodological strategy for doing intersectional theorizing. Yet this claim itself is hegemonic. Where is the evidence that relational analyses of social phenomena yield better explanations of the social world than other types of analyses?

In Chapter 7, "Relationality within Intersectionality," I examine this challenging issue of conceptualizing the dynamics of relationality within intersectional inquiry. I ask, How might intersectionality develop a substantive, theoretical argument that explains the relational processes that lie at its very core? To address this question, I sketch out three modes of relational thinking within intersectionality—namely, relationality through addition, articulation, and co-formation. To me, systematizing the relational logic that informs intersectionality's scholarship and activism offers a promising first step for clarifying the contours of relationality itself. Because relational thinking through addition, articulation, and co-formation constitute starting points, not end points, for analyzing relationality, they offer one way of organizing the thinking tools that people take into varying intersectional projects.

In chapter 8, "Intersectionality without Social Justice," I analyze the taken-for-granted assumptions that social justice is inherently a part of intersectionality and that doing intersectional scholarship is somehow the same as doing social justice work. I do so by placing intersectionality in dialogue with eugenics, a once normal science that has been closely associated with ultranationalism. I argue that eugenics lacked a commitment to social justice, yet its effectiveness relied on a relational logic that bears striking resemblance to that of intersectionality. Significantly, eugenics drew upon understandings of race, gender, class, nation, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability in ways that made its core premises intelligible and that simultaneously generated support for its political goals. What lessons might intersectionality draw from the case of eugenics concerning the significance of an ethical commitment within scholarship? What is the place of ethics within intersectionality writ large and within intersectionality as critical social theory in particular?

Together, these two chapters aim to sharpen intersectionality's critical edge. But they raise more questions than they answer, leaving it to readers to decide whether these are the issues that intersectionality needs to examine, and if so, how to go about doing so. In this sense, chapters 7 and 8 invoke the spirit of the entire book, one of raising questions and trying to answer them, recognizing that because intersectionality is fundamentally dialogical, no one person or group can have all of the answers. Developing intersectionality as a critical social theory that is not just ideas is a collective, collaborative endeavor.

I realize that *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* raises more questions than it answers, but perhaps that is the purpose of doing critical social theory. Critical 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. To create a foundation for this internal and external self-reflexivity, throughout *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* I explore how epistemological and political criteria shape both intersectionality's contours as a resistant knowledge and its status as a critical social theory. I place epistemology front stage in ways that show how ways of understanding truth frame knowledge projects in general and intersectionality in particular. Because truth is so intertwined in political concerns, I also place far more emphasis on power and politics in this book than is standard in intellectual histories of social theory. In doing so, my goal is to provide a complex, expansive, yet not overly complicated way of moving into and through intersectionality's theoretical issues and controversies.

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No one book can be all things to all people, and this book is no exception. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* is a labor of love that brings an additional lens to my ongoing intellectual activism (see, e.g., Collins 2013). It builds on and extends dimensions of my long-standing engagement with intersectionality. Across a series of books and articles, I've been painstakingly making my way through distinct bodies of scholarship on race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and age, among other categories of analysis. A few examples illustrate how the understanding of intersectionality that I bring to you in this volume reflects my serious study of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, and age, both singularly and in varying combinations, over an extended period of time. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), I provided an intersectional analysis of African American women's intellectual production,

arguing that Black feminism constituted an independent knowledge project that took a distinctive standpoint on and engaged in a distinctive politics in response to oppression. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), I examined racism, sexism, and heterosexism as mutually constructing systems of power, arguing that African American political struggle needed to take all into account. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (2006) developed a framework that incorporated nationalism as a system of power into my intellectual work, focusing both on the ideologies of racism, nationalism, and feminism as well as on public policies and political activism that ensued. Through nine editions of *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, Margaret Andersen and I reviewed emerging scholarship on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age, effectively mapping the field every three years by surveying what people were publishing. By selecting articles that reflected intersectional analysis and identifying persisting limitations within intersectionality (the treatment of social class) as well as new areas of inquiry (sexuality and transnationalism), we were able to trace, in real time, how the field developed (Andersen and Collins 2016). Collectively, these and other publications laid a sociological foundation for engaging the thematic content, characteristic practices, and theoretical contours of intersectionality. I detail my involvement in intersectionality to illustrate that I am serious about this material. It is not a fad for me, and as my own intellectual trajectory illustrates, there are no shortcuts to intersectionality.

This is a big book full of big ideas. Much is at stake in getting intersectionality right within our current social, intellectual, and political contexts. Intersectionality emerged in the mid-twentieth century during massive social changes that were catalyzed by and reflected in a range of social movements. If contemporary intersectionality embraces this legacy and develops critical tools that can deal with the challenges of our times, it holds similar potential now. Intersectionality is now far bigger than its mid-twentieth-century history. It has taken on a life of its own in arenas as diverse as human rights, public policy, social media, and social movements. Significantly, it has also made its way into academia and has taken root there, showing admirable staying power. Intersectionality's reach goes beyond the groups who initially advanced its claims through their critical ideas and actions. Intersectionality has not been business as usual—it has proven itself to be scrappy and resilient under difficult conditions. Many people have found intersectionality to be an important intellectual, political, and ethical tool for empowerment. What will it take for it to remain so? That is the subject of this book.