

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

On Intersectionality: A Review Essay

Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader. Edited by PATRICK GRZANKA. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2014.

Intersectionality. By PATRICIA HILL COLLINS and SIRMA BILGE. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016.

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Nearly thirty years ago, Kimberlé Crenshaw published the theory of “intersectionality,” in which she argued that racism and sexism collide to make black women’s marginalization distinct from that experienced by both white women and black men, and further that our legal institutions did not recognize these distinctions (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). This is, of course, the history most often tethered to the theory. But perhaps we need new ways to think about “intersectionality” and “intersectional feminism.” These now ubiquitous terms are deployed in aspirational, critical, and contradictory ways by activists, scholars, bloggers, and politicians alike. Discourses of intersectionality have even entered the marketplace; Queer Supply, a Toronto-based artists’ collective and clothing purveyor, claims, for example, “that the rejection of oppressive social structures can be achieved through self-love and community support. Queer Supply is about celebrating the intersectionality that strengthens us.” Queer Supply certainly puts the “sell” in celebrating intersectionality—indeed, one need only purchase a t-shirt to achieve intersectionality’s imperative. Given the term’s ubiquity, it has become difficult to discern not only what constitutes this imperative but also the term’s very definition. Patrick Grzanka’s *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* and Patricia Hill Collins’s and Sirma Bilge’s *Intersectionality* provide readers with tools for thinking in new ways about the paradoxes, promises, and perils of deployments of intersectionality.

INTERSECTIONALITY: A FOUNDATIONS AND FRONTIERS READER

Patrick Grzanka’s *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* provides, as its name suggests, an introduction to the concept of intersectionality. The book is

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organized into ten distinct units: law; epistemology; identities; space, place, communities, and geographies; culture and the politics of representation; violence, resistance, and activism; nations, borders, and migrations; politics, rights, and justice; science, technology and bodies; and, finally, methods. Each of the units is composed of four or five essays and begins with a short introduction written by Grzanka. The range of both the topics addressed and the (inter)disciplinary institutional locations of contributing scholars speaks to the capaciousness of intersectionality (as theory, method, practice)—that is, its usefulness for addressing a range of issues across academic fields—as well as the promise of Grzanka’s anthology.

It is worth spending some time discussing Grzanka’s introduction to the volume as it is the text’s most substantive original contribution, and also speaks to broad trends in contemporary thinking on intersectionality. Grzanka outlines three sets of questions that motivate the collection. The first is concerned with “the movement of intersectionality through history and across disciplines” (xiv). Where, Grzanka asks, did intersectionality come from, and where is it going? In prioritizing the term’s movement, Grzanka outlines intersectionality’s origin stories, suggesting a need to move beyond one particular story. He begins by citing Roderick Ferguson, who argues, “[n]o one can really say when the theory emerged. Some say the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw created it. Others locate it even further back, with the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977. Most agree that the category was a way to address the simultaneity of modes of difference” (Ferguson 2012, 91, in Grzanka, xiv). Building upon Ferguson’s refusal to provide a single origin for the term, Grzanka outlines “another ‘origin story’ of intersectionality” (xvi). We can find, Grzanka asserts, a “rich history of intersectional thinking” in the work of civil rights activists (for example, Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells) and black lesbian feminists writing in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith). We can also look to non-Western women of color (for example, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty) who brought postcolonial critique to their discussions of intersectionality, as well as to non-Black US women of color (for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga). For Grzanka, moving beyond a single origin story enables us to better recognize the term’s usefulness and capaciousness.

The second set of questions motivating the anthology includes “What does intersectionality do? How do we do intersectionality?” (xvii). Beyond questioning whether intersectionality is a theory or a method or something else altogether—which other scholars have done (Nash 2008)—Grzanka draws from the introduction to the *Signs* special issue on intersectionality edited by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall to suggest that “intersectionality is an analytic disposition” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 795, in Grzanka, xviii). This framing is crucial for understanding the range of scholars who are included in the volume, most of whom do not utilize the word “intersectionality” but who think intersectionally, according to Grzanka. This approach is in line with Grzanka’s desire to move beyond intersectionality’s origin stories and contributes to the nearly ubiquitous understandings of intersectionality as examining the simultaneity of oppression.

The third set of questions driving the text includes: “What are intersectionality’s objectives? What are its transformative potentials?” (xx). Here, Grzanka claims that “theorizing oppression was never the end point” and that intersectionality “demand[s] new theorizing, new methods, and new forms of social action” (xxii). That questions related to social action and transformation are so central to a text composed solely by academics—most of whom are not addressing the debates on intersectionality or the promises and perils of the theory—speaks to the ongoing usefulness of academic theory for related social action. At the same time, we might address this relationship between academic theory and social action, and more precisely intersectionality’s transformative potential, differently by turning to Patricia Hill Collins’s and Sirma Bilge’s *Intersectionality*, a text published two years after Grzanka’s edited volume.

INTERSECTIONALITY: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Patricia Hill Collins’s and Sirma Bilge’s volume *Intersectionality* is an accessible guide for scholars, activists, and everyday people seeking to understand and make use of the concept of intersectionality. The text is especially concerned with questions about intersectionality’s intellectual and political histories, which the authors anchor in the late 1960s through early 1980s. It was in this historical moment that US women of color, especially black feminists, including those in the Combahee River Collective (Combahee 1977/1995), “developed their intersectional analysis in the context of social movements for decolonization, desegregation, and feminism” (68). Much like Grzanka, Collins and Bilge complicate those origin stories that link intersectionality solely to the academic text in which Crenshaw first coined the term.

In demonstrating such a “counter-history,” the authors make the case that its foundational *raison d’être*, historically speaking, was to address the intersecting problems of racism, sexism, and class exploitation. The imperative to attend to the simultaneity of oppressions has taken on a life of its own, academically and in activist milieu; now, scholars and activists alike deploy discourses of intersectionality to refer to addressing not only racism and sexism, but any and all social divisions and inequalities, including homophobia, dis/ability, citizenship status, and so on. The authors develop the notion of intersectional sensibilities to address this shift, an approach in line with Grzanka’s articulation of intersectionality as a way of thinking, an analytic disposition committed to examining the simultaneity of oppression and eradicating social inequalities. For Collins and Bilge, the heterogeneity of intersectionality is not “a weakness but rather. . . a source of tremendous potential” (204).

Collins and Bilge are as concerned with intersectionality’s circulation within academic contexts as they are with the ways in which it is practically applied as a means of addressing social inequality. The authors argue that people in a wide variety of social locations—classrooms, global social protests, festivals, world sporting events, and homes—can and do make use of intersectionality. In drawing from such a remarkable array of examples that cut across social, political, and geographical contexts, Collins and Bilge show that people around the world call on intersectional

sensibilities, even those not explicitly named as such. In doing so, those deploying intersectional ways of thinking and being “challenge the status quo and aim to transform power relations” (33). This positioning of intersectionality as rooted in—and necessarily maintaining a commitment to—an ethics of social justice is a key epistemological and methodological insight of the book.

This version of intersectionality intervenes in the notion that intersectionality is simply analysis of difference and identity, unmoored from those relations of power that give social divisions meaning in the world. Collins and Bilge refer to such approaches as emptying intersectionality of praxis, which they see as a trend in current intersectional scholarship. *Intersectionality* attempts to reclaim the concept from what Collins and Bilge see as the kind of academic institutionalization that threatens to render it impotent and apolitical, “just another scholarly discourse” (198). Collins and Bilge express uncertainty about the impact of intersectionality’s academic institutionalization, particularly the versions of intersectional analyses that have moved away from what they see as social-justice projects located, for example, in Black and Chicana feminism such that “their primary focus on social movement politics could no longer be assumed” (79).

For Collins and Bilge, the academic evacuation of praxis from intersectionality is connected to the view that intersectionality is an analysis of identity and difference. The authors are highly critical of those academic approaches that leave intact dominant understandings of identity and deploy overly reductive identity categories. Collins and Bilge claim that discussions of such categories often stand in for an analysis of the structures that produce the marginalized identities with which people are identifying. The authors express that they “have been especially troubled by the decreasing focus on social inequality within intersectionality’s scholarship” (201), stating:

The hollowing-out of meanings of rich scholarly traditions that have long been associated with processes and systems of social inequalities—for example, capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and nationalism—and replacing them with shortcut terms of race, class, gender, and nation may appear to be benign substitution, but much is lost when systems of power compete for space under some versions of intersectionality. (201)

Put more succinctly, “sexism, racism, and heterosexism contain the ‘ism’ that makes them recognizable as unjust systems of power” (201). Collins and Bilge take a different path, advocating for an approach to collective identity politics as strategically mobilized in the service of intersectional inquiry and praxis. Although Collins and Bilge argue for reclaiming collective identity politics as a site for strengthening intersectional projects, they also recognize that “nuance... is lost when gender, race, and sexuality become redefined as identity categories” (201). In their demand that intersectionality be recovered “from people who often have little or no commitment to intersectionality’s social justice ethos” (198), they offer a broad definition of intersectionality as a heuristic device: “When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division... but by many axes that work together and

influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (193). We might benefit from putting into conversation Collins and Bilge's capacious definition and approach to intersectionality with a question that animates their text: "Is intersectionality a victim of its own success" (198)? Doing so enables us to critically examine intersectionality's ubiquity and outline a series of questions inspired by the expansive approaches of both texts we discuss here.

LINKAGES, QUESTIONS, CONCERNS

The books on intersectionality by Collins and Bilge and Grzanka contain multiple points of overlap: intersectionality as an analytic disposition or sensibility; the need for alternative origin stories beyond Crenshaw's; calls for new work on intersectionality that is attentive to global inequalities; and a commitment to examining power relations in the service of transformative politics. However, there are also significant differences. For example, Grzanka's *Intersectionality* is an anthology composed of previously published academic work by well-known scholars. For those familiar with social theory, the text reads as a who's who of critical race and feminist theory. At times, it is unclear to what extent intersectionality is a useful framing mechanism for tying together the individual entries, and further, how these very entries advance our understanding of intersectionality. Nonetheless, Grzanka's superb editing and translating of complicated theoretical ideas into a digestible format is a significant intellectual contribution, one that will be particularly useful for introductory courses on difference, marginalization, and oppression. By contrast, Collins and Bilge consider the political practices and approaches of activists as well as scholars; this widening of intersectional inquiry and praxis will benefit those looking for new intellectual and political anchors from which to launch their social justice work. Put otherwise, the interventions they make, questions they ask, and material they utilize will likely resonate beyond the academy.

In light of the linkages and points of divergence in the books reviewed, we might ask about the limits of the approaches these scholars take. How does broadening intersectionality's origin stories function to ignore the specificity of the lives of black women and the structures that construct the particularity of the anti-black racism and sexism they experience? In a related vein, and following Ferguson, we might also ask about the limits of "agree[ing] that [intersectionality] was a way to address the simultaneity of modes of difference" (91). Can such an approach function in the service of postraciality? Why do race, class, and gender become the stand-ins for intersectional analysis in some moments, and in others, intersectionality is described as a way to examine any forms of oppression occurring simultaneously? Is intersectionality useful for examining those experiences defined by privilege as much as oppression? How can people who are located within ostensibly powerful institutions most effectively critique those very structures, which disempower so many people? In this moment when gender studies, ethnic studies, and related fields are under attack by

the right wing precisely because of the assumption that our research and teaching are politically motivated, what are the benefits and limits to tethering intersectionality to projects for social justice? Although these texts do not directly address these questions, they give us the tools to spur new conversations and continue old ones. Ultimately, both volumes ask us to consider intersectionality as a place from which one embarks on the journey to creating a more just society, rather than as a point of arrival—an a priori signal of progressive or radical politics. In a moment when intersectionality often functions as a stand-in for a more nuanced articulation of an academic or political argument, the interventions offered by these texts are crucial for scholars and activists alike.

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