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# Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas

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## Abstract

The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena. Despite this general consensus, definitions of what counts as intersectionality are far from clear. In this article, I analyze intersectionality as a knowledge project whose *raison d'être* lies in its attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities. I examine three interdependent sets of concerns: (a) intersectionality as a field of study that is situated within the power relations that it studies; (b) intersectionality as an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision on social phenomena; and (c) intersectionality as critical praxis that informs social justice projects.

## INTRODUCTION

By 1997, when I was asked to organize a session on “Race, Class and Gender” for the American Sociological Association’s (ASA’s) annual meetings, interest in the field of race/class/gender studies had grown dramatically. As I read through approximately 30 paper submissions, only a handful seemed to fit the session’s theme. Most papers mentioned race or class or gender in various combinations, yet papers submitted to the “Race, Class and Gender” session differed little from those submitted to other sessions on *either* race *or* class *or* gender. What criteria characterized the papers that I selected? The *and* seemed to matter, but how? My initial response to these questions was much like that of US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s dilemma when asked to define pornography. Acknowledging that he had no definitive definition, Stewart proclaimed, “I know it when I see it.” I shared Stewart’s dilemma concerning the papers—I “knew” the appropriate papers for the race, class, and gender session when I saw them. Yet I was less clear about my standards for selection.

Planning my 2012 graduate seminar on “Intersectionality” raised similar issues. Because so much intersectional scholarship had been published by then, I anticipated that selecting readings for the course would be easy. Not so. Faced with the absence of guidelines, I settled on exploring intersectionality’s definitions as our collective project for the course. The syllabus contained the following charge:

What exactly is intersectionality? Is it a concept, a paradigm, a heuristic device, a methodology, or a theory? If it is a theory, what kind of theory is it? Because intersectionality constitutes a new term applied to a diverse set of practices, interpretations, methodologies and political orientations, we cannot assume that we are studying a fixed body of knowledge. Instead, our course will investigate the question of the interpretive frames of intersectionality itself.

Despite our best efforts, by the end of the course my students and I both seemed stuck in Stewart’s dilemma—we thought we “knew” intersectionality when we saw it but couldn’t quite define what it was.

These two experiences constitute two instances where I encountered intersectionality’s definitional dilemma of defining the field neither so narrowly that it reflects the interests of any one segment nor so broadly that its very popularity causes it to lose meaning. Casting a self-reflexive eye not only on the substance of intersectional scholarship but also on the processes that legitimated it constituted one important step in seeing the interconnections between what counted as intersectionality and the processes that upheld changing and various definitions of it. Activities such as selecting papers for an ASA session, choosing readings for a graduate syllabus, or determining which citations to include in journal articles such as this one may seem objective. Yet, collectively, these practices suggest that the significance of conference papers, syllabi, publications, and citation patterns lies less in the content of individual documents than in processes of selection themselves. When it comes to addressing intersectionality’s definitional dilemma, the devil is in the details.

By now, a general consensus exists about intersectionality’s general contours. The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities. Variations of intersectional scholarship can now be found across interdisciplinary fields as well as within more traditional disciplinary endeavors (Collins & Chepp 2013). Variations of intersectional practice can also be found within and outside the academy. Teachers, social workers, parents, policy advocates, university support

staff, community organizers, clergy, lawyers, graduate students, nurses, and other practitioners find themselves upholding and challenging social inequalities. Practitioners both search for and propose ideas that will explain their experiences with the social problems around them. Given these wide-ranging approaches and concerns, intersectionality's current definitional state still resembles Stewart's dilemma: Scholars and practitioners think they know intersectionality when they see it. More importantly, they conceptualize intersectionality in dramatically different ways when they use it.

To explore this definitional fluidity, this article addresses one fundamental question: What is intersectionality? I am not trying to prematurely tame intersectionality's unruliness by imposing an imperial definition from above. Definitions constitute starting points for investigation rather than end points of analysis. Presenting a finished definition of intersectionality that can be used to determine whether a given book, article, law, or practice fits within a preconceived intersectional framework misreads both intersectionality's complexity and this article's intent. Most people consult dictionaries to find such quick, concise ways of categorizing social phenomena, forgetting that ideas, fields of study, set of practices, or definitions themselves are never finished. Instead, definitions emerge from more iterative, grassroots processes that enable intellectual and political consensus to emerge through everyday practices such as organizing sessions, developing syllabi, or choosing citations.

By now, enough evidence exists to categorize focal points within intersectionality's burgeoning scholarly literature and the actions of its practitioners. My goal is to provide navigational tools for thinking about intersectionality rather than coverage of intersectionality writ large. In the next section, I identify a set of conceptual tools that provide an intellectual and political context for intersectionality. Drawing upon racial formation theory, I suggest that because intersectionality's *raison d'être* lies in its attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities, it constitutes a broad-based knowledge project. Intersectionality also houses a dynamic assemblage of interpretive communities, each of which has its own understanding of intersectionality and advances corresponding knowledge projects. In the remaining sections, I examine three interdependent sets of concerns that characterize intersectionality as a broad-based knowledge project: (a) intersectionality as a field of study, e.g., its history, themes, boundaries, debates, and direction; (b) intersectionality as an analytical strategy, e.g., how intersectional frameworks provide new angles of vision on social institutions, practices, social problems, and other social phenomena associated with social inequality; and (c) intersectionality as critical praxis, e.g., how social actors use intersectionality for social justice projects.

## **RACIAL FORMATION THEORY, KNOWLEDGE PROJECTS, AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

Intersectionality faces a particular definitional dilemma—it participates in the very power relations that it examines and, as a result, must pay special attention to the conditions that make its knowledge claims comprehensible. Because analyzing the relations between knowledge and power is the traditional bailiwick of the sociology of knowledge, this field provides important theoretical vocabulary for conceptualizing intersectionality as both reflecting and shaping the power relations that house it. A sociology of knowledge framework suggests that knowledge—including knowledge aimed at better understanding intersectionality—is socially constructed and transmitted, legitimated, and reproduced. Yet within this core tenet, scholars have placed various emphases on the types of knowledge deemed worthy of study, the conceptions of social structure that house and/or are shaped by knowledge, and the influence of knowledge itself in shaping power relations (Balibar 2007, Berger & Luckmann 1966, Foucault 1980, Mannheim 1954, Swidler & Ardit 1994).

Within a broader critical race theory landscape (Delgado & Stefancic 2013), racial formation theory shows special promise for addressing intersectionality's definitional dilemma [Omi & Winant 2014 (1994)]. Because it conceptualizes race as situated within the recursive relationship between social structures and cultural representations, racial formation theory conflates neither discourses about race (e.g., racial meanings, representations, and social identities) nor the power relations in which racial meanings are situated. Both are held separate yet interconnected. Historically constructed, ever-changing racial formations organize racialized groups, the specific patterns of racial inequality that link racialized populations, and social problems that ensue. For example, in the United States, the racial formation of color-conscious racism has relied on a deep-seated logic of segregation that was applied to all aspects of social structures and cultural representations. In contrast, contemporary color-blind racism constitutes a differently organized yet equally powerful racial formation that manages to replicate racial hierarchies, often without overt attention to race itself (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Brown et al. 2003). Despite being more visible in different historical periods or across cross-national settings—both South Africa's racial apartheid and Brazil's racial democracy established racial hierarchies that persist—color-conscious and color-blind racial formations do not displace one another. As structural forms of power, one or the other racial formation may predominate, yet typically they coexist.

Racial formations have distinctive configurations of racial projects for which interest groups advance various interpretations of racial inequality. Within racial formation theory, ideas matter, not simply as hegemonic ideologies produced by elites but also as tangible, multiple knowledge projects that are advanced by specific interpretive communities. Because groups aim to have their interpretations of racial inequality prevail, knowledge lies at the heart of racial projects.

The question is less whether race is real or whether racial projects exist, but rather what kinds of racial projects appear and disappear across specific racial formations and why. For example, African American intellectual production has a storied history of protesting both the social structural dimensions of racism and the cultural representations of people of African descent (Kelley 2002). Yet despite these efforts, the richness of these knowledge projects rarely make it into the legitimated canon of established fields. Similarly, the eugenics projects that advanced widely accepted scientific knowledge about race had significant impact on the public policies of the United States, Germany, and many nation-states. Eugenics arguments fell out of favor in the post-World War II era, suggesting that counterarguments claiming that race was socially constructed with no connections to biology had prevailed. Yet in a postgenomic age, the resurgence of race in science, law, and medicine points to the resiliency of biological understandings of race within contemporary racial projects of science itself, typically without racially discriminatory intent (Duster 2015). The word "eugenics" fell out of favor, but ideas about the centrality of biology, newly defined in determining various aspects of human social behavior, have been more difficult to uproot. Just as racial formations change in response to racial projects, racial projects change in relation to changing racial formations.

Racial formation theory offers one additional benefit for intersectionality. Through its analysis of racial projects, racial formation theory can account for change in ways that retain the agency of individual human actors and group-based action. In contrast to the sociology of knowledge's traditional emphasis on individual intellectuals as superior if not the sole producers of knowledge—whether Mannheim's *intelligentsia* or Gramsci's *organic intellectuals*—this theory makes room for multiple interpretive communities. Because understanding racial inequality remains central to racial formation theory, it provides intellectual and political space for subordinated social groups such as African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and indigenous peoples. Such groups find intellectual and political space within racial formation theory for the group-based knowledge of racial projects that oppose racial hierarchy and racial inequality (Collins 1998a, pp. 201–28). Racial formation

theory offers social actors guidance as to how their individual and collective actions matter in shaping racial inequality.

The strength of racial formation theory lies in how it links specific knowledge projects (racial projects) with historically constructed power relations (racial formations). Intersectionality can build on this foundation by moving beyond a mono-categorical focus on racial inequality to encompass multiple forms of inequality that are organized via a similar logic. As an initial step, this framework can be applied to other social formations and knowledge projects that reproduce inequality, for example, social formations of patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, and their characteristic knowledge projects. Yet intersectionality goes farther than this mono-system analysis, introducing a greater level of complexity into conceptualizing inequality. Whereas racial formation theory (ironically, itself a knowledge project) focuses on racism as a mono-categorical system of power, intersectionality examines social formations of multiple, complex social inequalities. In order to build on racial formation theory's promise, however, intersectionality would need to flesh out a more nuanced sociological understanding of how social structures and cultural representations interconnect. Knowledge projects are not free-floating phenomena; they are grounded in specific sociological processes experienced by actual people. Here a robust analysis of the new politics of community provides a way of grounding the more theoretical arguments in both racial formation theory and intersectionality (Collins 2010). Linking power with knowledge, the construct of community provides an important framework for understanding the interpretive communities that advance intersectionality's many knowledge projects.

Intersectionality can be conceptualized as an overarching knowledge project whose changing contours grow from and respond to social formations of complex social inequalities; within this overarching umbrella, intersectionality can also be profitably conceptualized as a constellation of knowledge projects that change in relation to one another in tandem with changes in the interpretive communities that advance them. The broader knowledge project provides a set of ideas that provide moments of definitional consensus. Overarching intersectional frameworks have been so successful because they remain broad and unspecified. They provide the illusion that the constellation of smaller knowledge projects can be uncritically categorized under intersectionality's big tent umbrella. Yet the sets of practitioners that lay claim to intersectionality via multiple cross-cutting and competitive intersectional knowledge projects reveal a lack of consensus about intersectionality's history, current organization, and future directions. Intersectionality's definitional dilemma occurs in this intellectual and political space.

In consideration of this framework, intersectional knowledge projects typically focus on three interdependent concerns. The first focal point makes intersectionality as a field of study the object of investigation. Examining the content and themes that characterize the field constitutes the main task. Why does this field exist? How is this field of study situated within prevailing power relations? How does this social location shape the kinds of themes and approaches that characterize intersectionality as a field of study?

The second focal point of intersectional knowledge projects examines intersectionality as an analytical strategy. These projects rely upon intersectional frameworks to produce new knowledge about the social world. Garnering the lion's share of attention within intersectionality as a field of study, this approach uses intersectional frameworks to investigate social phenomena, e.g., social institutions, practices, social problems, and the epistemological concerns of the field itself.

The third focal point emphasizes intersectionality as a form of critical praxis, especially its connections with social justice. This praxis perspective does not separate scholarship from practice, with scholarship providing theoretical frameworks that people are encouraged to apply to practice. Instead, both scholarship and practice are recursively linked, with practice being foundational to intersectional analysis.



## TRAVELING LIGHT? INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FIELD OF STUDY

Intersectionality's increasing acceptance as a field of study within the academy is clearly evident. By the early 2000s, heightened interest in intersectionality fostered a blizzard of journal articles, special editions to journals, edited volumes, and undergraduate anthologies. For example, the Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland manages the searchable Intersectional Research Database, which contains an extensive collection of bibliographical resources on intersectional scholarship. Several special editions of journals have also been devoted to various aspects of intersectionality as a field of study. Between 2008 and 2013, the following journals published special editions on intersectionality: *Journal of Sex Roles*, volume 59, issues 5 and 6, in 2008; *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, volume 12, issue 1, in 2009; *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, volume 54, issue 1, in 2010; *Social Politics*, volume 19, issue 4, Winter, and *Gender and Society*, volume 26, issue 1, February, in 2012; *Signs*, volume 38, issue 4 (Cho et al. 2013), in 2013; and *Du Bois Review*, volume 10, issue 2 (Carbado et al. 2013), in 2013. Monographs too numerous to cite here use the term intersectionality, as well as various combinations of the terms race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability in their titles (Berger & Guidroz 2009, Dill & Zambrana 2009, Lutz et al. 2011). The growth and institutionalization of intersectionality can also be measured by the arrival of undergraduate readers whose purpose is to introduce intersectionality to students and the lay public. In this regard, publications such as *Race, Class and Gender*, an anthology that I edited with Margaret Andersen (Andersen & Collins 2012); *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (Grzanka 2014); and *Intersectionality: Key Concepts* (P.H. Collins & S. Bilge, unpublished manuscript) illustrate the institutionalization of intersectionality.

Intersectionality's rapid growth and seemingly quick acceptance come with their own set of benefits and challenges. On the one hand, intersectionality's rapid expansion has fostered a dynamism that has encouraged creativity within and across academic disciplines. From various vantage points, scholars claim the language of intersectionality (Carbado et al. 2013, Cho et al. 2013). For example, intersectionality has been strongly associated with women's studies, gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, and other interdisciplinary fields, as well as within the humanities, history, and similar disciplines with strong narrative traditions. Intersectionality has also traveled, albeit unevenly, throughout the social sciences for which intersectional frameworks have catalyzed productive avenues of investigation (Dill & Zambrana 2009). Scholars within traditional social science disciplines, as well as those working within more applied fields such as public policy, criminology, and education, have found intersectionality to be of value. Sociology has been at the forefront of these developments, investigating intersectionality's theoretical and methodological contributions to understanding social inequalities (Anderson 1996, Choo & Ferree 2010, Collins 2007).

On the other hand, the seemingly positive reception of intersectionality as a field of study raises the question of which aspects of intersectionality are finding acceptance and which are not. In his now-classic 1983 essay on traveling theory, Edward Said (1983, pp. 31–53) claimed that theories can lose their originality and critical stance as they travel from one domain to another. Several authors have taken up Said's framework to discuss intersectionality's travels. For example, Knapp (2005) examines how fast traveling theories such as intersectionality often gain acceptance by distilling the complexity of its arguments in ways that often misrepresent its initial intent. Alexander-Floyd (2012) explains how critical intellectual projects such as Black feminism and intersectionality have been weakened within the contemporary academy. In a retrospective piece, Chandra Mohanty (2013), a groundbreaking leader within transnational feminism, describes how her own work on feminism and intersectionality has been misrecognized and misappropriated within contemporary academic politics. Said did revisit his earlier ideas about traveling theory

to articulate another possibility, namely, that theories can become changed in positive ways as they travel (Carbado 2013). The contemporary legitimization of intersectionality may be one such benefit. Intersectionality's visibility in these venues provides scholars and laypeople alike access to its ideas. Legitimation invites heterogeneous users to take up its ideas.

Because power relations and social inequality have been so central to intersectional knowledge projects, too much is at stake to ignore the implications of intersectionality's travels. Like similar knowledge projects that set out to address social inequalities by reforming and transforming the academy, intersectionality's travels constitute a contested space (Parker & Samantrai 2010). In particular, intersectionality's travels from social movements into the academy enable some dimensions of intersectionality to flourish, leaving others to languish, if not disappear.

## The Case of US Black Feminism

US Black feminism has been an especially visible site for the emergence of race/class/gender and its incorporation into the academy. As such, it provides an important lens on intersectionality as a traveling knowledge project. US Black feminism in the 1960s and 1970s constituted one site of a much broader array of cross-cultural, cross-national, and historically specific social justice projects that aimed to dismantle multiple social inequalities. African American women were part of broader social movements of which Chicanas and other Latinas, indigenous women, and Asian American women (who subsequently became redefined as women of color) were at the forefront, raising claims about the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality in their everyday lived experience. Latinas, for example, were engaged in similar intellectual and political struggles to create space for their empowerment within the confines of social movement politics that, similar to Black politics, were shaped by a patriarchal nationalism. Latina feminism, generated by the radical writings of women of color (Anzaldúa & Moraga 1983), also came of age in the 1970s and 1980s (Roth 2004).

Beyond the specificity of women of color as social actors in the US context, similar ideas that neither have been acknowledged as intersectional nor have experienced the widespread visibility and influence currently enjoyed by intersectionality as a field of study also exist. Place and time matter. For example, because intersecting power relations that foster complex social inequalities take various forms across national contexts, race, class, and gender are not equally salient. In the United Kingdom, Stuart Hall's pioneering work within cultural studies analyzed how complex social inequalities of class, nation, race, and ethnicity are linked to immigrant experiences and British multiculturalism (Morley & Chen 1996). Gender was not initially central to cultural studies, entering the field through feminist critiques that moved cultural studies in intersectional directions. As part of this unnamed intersectional intellectual and political context, Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, and other European feminists introduced similar ideas that, in hindsight, constituted intersectional knowledge projects (Yuval-Davis 2011, pp. 3–5). Despite these important interventions, their work is neither identified as foundational to intersectionality nor valorized within contemporary intersectionality origin stories. Historical specificity also matters. Within the tight intellectual and political space of early-twentieth-century color-conscious racism, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida Wells-Barnett launched similar arguments. For Cooper and Wells-Barnett, African American women's subordination relied on race/gender ideologies that explained practices as diverse as eugenics and lynching. In this context, African American women's empowerment required knowledge projects that were up to the task of contesting both racism and sexism (Cooper 1892, Wells-Barnett 2002).

Collectively, these knowledge projects foreshadowed the incorporation of race/class/gender studies into the academy. A closer look at the US Black feminist projects of the 1960s and 1970s



illustrates how interpretive communities within social movement settings set the stage for intersectional analysis. The bulk of US Black feminism remained grassroots, local, and tightly interwoven with multiple forms of community organizing (Schutz & Sandy 2011). Historian Anne Valk's study of how second-wave feminism and Black liberation took shape within Washington, DC, provides a rigorous rendering of how heterogeneous interpretive communities hammered out a collective feminist knowledge project. Valk uses community organizing as a framework to situate women from across various races, social classes, and sexualities as intellectual and political actors. Local community organizing projects on welfare rights, reproductive freedom, Black liberation, lesbian feminism, and sexual violence produced cross-cutting and consensus agendas that linked African American identity politics with those of white women across class and sexual orientation. Casting a trained eye on the conflicts and consensus among the various organizations, Valk (2008) details how various grassroots organizations came to see over time how they needed to work together to build a broad-based coalitional politics. The challenges they faced within interlocking systems of oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not be solved by mono-categorical solutions.

Valk's study is not about Black feminism per se, yet it introduces selected main ideas of social justice projects of the time that foreshadow both race/class/gender studies and intersectionality. Several themes permeated this particular case: (a) community organizing as foundational to political engagement of oppressed groups; (b) the centrality of identity politics to empower African American women and similarly subordinated groups; (c) coalitional politics as essential for working across differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality; (d) interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender as a structural frame for understanding multiple social inequalities; and (e) an ethos of social justice as fundamental to understanding and challenging social inequality. Valk's study also indicates how these ideas reflect the actions of specific interpretive communities that were responding to particular social contexts.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, through an outpouring of pamphlets, poetry, essays, edited volumes, art, and other creative endeavors, African American women working in community organizing developed various aspects of these main ideas. One document from this period stands out as a touchstone for the convergence of these core ideas. In 1982, the Combahee River Collective, a community organizing initiative of a small group of African American women in Boston, circulated the position paper "A Black Feminist Statement," which laid out a more comprehensive statement of the framework that had permeated Black feminism as a social justice project (Combahee River Collective 1995). This groundbreaking document argued that race-only or gender-only frameworks advanced partial and incomplete analyses of the social injustices that characterize African American women's lives, and that race, gender, social class, and sexuality all shaped Black women's experiences. The Statement proposed that allegedly separate systems of oppression were interlocking. Because racism, class exploitation, patriarchy, and homophobia collectively shaped African American women's experiences, their liberation required a comprehensive response to multiple systems of oppression. The work of the Collective foreshadows important ideas within intersectional knowledge projects, namely, viewing the task of understanding complex social inequalities as inextricably linked to social justice, or the intersections not just of ideas themselves, but of ideas and actions.

The goal of US Black feminist thought was neither a search for truth or the latest theoretical innovation nor even a quest to desegregate colleges and universities. Instead, Black feminism's immediate concern in the United States was to empower African American women through critical analyses of how mutually constructing systems of oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality framed the social issues and social inequalities that Black women faced. African American women were not alone in this endeavor to develop new forms of knowledge that would empower

people within what was clearly a global system of social injustice. Their intersectional framework suggested provocative links that might ground social justice projects, initially, of civil rights and feminism, the movements most directly affecting African American women, but also of other movements with a shared goal of transforming society. This analysis of how intersecting power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality affected African American women thus provided a provocative new framework for analyzing the social, political, and cultural realities of other groups (Collins 2000). In this regard, Black feminism as a knowledge project was both situated within the specific context of the United States and connected to broader, global social justice concerns (Collins 2000, pp. 227–50).

When public protests waned in the 1970s and 1980s, it appeared that social movement activism had died off. More accurately, these decades marked a change in location but not necessarily in substance (Taylor 1989). As students, faculty, and administrative support staff, African American women who had been involved with Black feminism brought their understandings of intellectual activism with them into the academy. In the United States, the intellectual production of African American women and Latinas in particular established the groundwork for various aspects of subsequent intersectional scholarship. Audre Lorde's (1984) analysis of oppositional and relational difference, as well as her sustained focus on power relations in "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," speaks to the use of poetry and analytical essays as important sites for theory. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera* not only made an important contribution in framing studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, it foreshadowed important themes such as border crossing, border space, boundaries, and relationality, which have subsequently become so prominent within contemporary intersectionality. Angela Davis (1981) began her sustained path of scholar-activism both by establishing an intellectual foundation for race, class, and gender and by calling for greater attention to social problems that were associated with the growth of the prison industry. Toni Morrison's (1971, 1987, 1992) books *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* examined the interior space of internalized oppression, raising entirely new questions about the ability of knowledge to oppress or empower.

Works such as these show how Black women's intellectual production and that of women of color engage different dimensions of the themes of community organizing, identity politics, coalitional politics, analyses of interlocking systems of oppression, and social justice. Other interpretive communities brought similar sensibilities. Yet the emphasis on interlocking oppressions constituted women of color's most visible and sustainable knowledge claim. It not only contained an explicit analysis of the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems of power, but also constituted one defining moment for the emergence of race/class/gender studies and its subsequent renaming as intersectionality (Collins 2000).

## From Race/Class/Gender Studies to Intersectionality

Intersectionality as a knowledge project remained unnamed as such during the 1980s, the major decade when its ideas but not its name were incorporated into the US academy. During this period, the phrase "race, class, and gender" emerged as a placeholder umbrella term into which ideas from several social justice movements coalesced. In this context, scholar-activists who shared similar albeit differently expressed sensibilities concerning community organizing, identity politics, coalitional politics, interlocking oppressions, and social justice introduced a lively set of ideas into the curricular and programmatic aspects of the academy. Their struggles were both intellectual, e.g., bringing new analyses to the research process, publishing new scholarship, and criticizing their own ideas and practices, and political, namely, changing the social organization of the academy

itself, an idea encapsulated by the concept of institutional transformation (Dill 2009). In essence, practitioners within race/class/gender studies created the conditions that made this knowledge project possible by building a malleable framework for future growth (Andersen & Collins 2012).

Scholar-activists who traveled into the academy in the 1980s and 1990s faced the challenge of having their ideas translated within and by interpretive communities within academia that were very different from those outside its boundaries. Their responses often lay in founding new interdisciplinary fields that became conduits for social movement sensibilities regarding social justice and race/class/gender (Parker & Samantrai 2010). Women's studies assumed an important leadership role by enabling gender scholars who were spread across various disciplines to gather, compare, and contrast the study of women within their distinctive disciplines, and then migrate back into those very same disciplines with this new knowledge. Lynn Weber (1998, p. 14), an early leader within race/class/gender studies, summarizes the significance of women's studies: "It is in Women's Studies – not in racial or ethnic studies, not in social stratification (class) studies in sociology, not in psychology or in other traditional disciplines – that race, class, gender, and sexuality studies first emerged." In essence, women's studies practitioners participated in a form of Anzaldúa's border crossing that desegregated both the symbolic boundaries of bodies of knowledge and the actual structural boundaries of established academic disciplines (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Given the size and breath of the community of women's studies practitioners, the acceptance of race/class/gender studies within women's studies also explains the rapid spread of race/class/gender studies across disparate disciplines.

Despite the centrality of both Black feminism and race/class/gender studies to social justice projects both inside and outside the academy, contemporary narratives concerning the emergence of intersectionality increasingly situate its origins as a field of study within academia. Prevailing stories of the emergence of intersectionality routinely grant naming rights to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), citing her *Stanford Law Review* article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." This article contains a well-argued analysis that develops important connections among the core ideas of community organizing, identity politics, coalitional politics, interlocking oppressions, and social justice. Yet these ideas remain overlooked in favor of a common practice across contemporary intersectional scholarship of mentioning Crenshaw's "coining" of the term intersectionality as the point of origin for intersectionality itself. This rhetorical strategy of mentioning one African American woman as intersectionality's foremother fosters a collective ritual that legitimates this particular origin story. Intersectionality seemingly was not of value until Crenshaw both discovered it and, through the recognition that her *Stanford Law Review* article received, aligned it more closely with, in Audre Lorde's words, the "master's tools" in the "master's house."

My sense is that intersectional research that mentions Crenshaw in this fashion has not thoroughly read her scholarship. Crenshaw herself has taken issue with this rendition of her own work, claiming that it is returned to her in forms that are often unrecognizable (Guidroz & Berger 2009). Yet despite this widespread practice of recasting Crenshaw's work to resemble colonial discoveries, "Mapping the Margins" is useful for marking a juncture when the ideas of social movement politics became named and subsequently incorporated into the academy. Crenshaw's article illustrates the links between social movement and community organizing sensibilities, the claim that intersectional frameworks were needed to address the social problem of violence against women of color, and the call for an identity politics to empower women of color. Within critical race studies, Crenshaw's scholarship also reflects key tenets of racial formation theory, in particular situating her analysis within the recursive relationship between social structures and cultural representations. Despite the intellectual richness of Crenshaw's work, contemporary narratives of the emergence of intersectionality rarely situate her work within this crucial

historical juncture linking knowledge projects from social movements advanced by women of color with the institutionalization of race/class/gender studies.

The baggage intersectionality now carries differs from the baggage it carried during these decades of academic incorporation (Parker et al. 2010). Intersectionality now garners its share of self-proclaimed experts and critics of its ideas and potential, many of whom demonstrate unsettling degrees of amnesia and/or ignorance concerning the scope of intersectional knowledge projects writ large. In her survey of the rhetorical devices used across articles that critique intersectionality, Tomlinson (2013) points out, “Many critics approach intersectionality carelessly, however, through meta-commentary and complaint and through recommendations to bring its radical critique under control by advocating recourse to specific disciplinary methods—without acknowledging that such methods may have long been criticized for their service to dominant discourse. Critics assume that their task is to critique intersectionality, not to foster intersectionality’s ability to critique subordination” (p. 996). As Bilge (2013) points out, the contemporary challenge for intersectionality as a field of study may lie in “saving intersectionality from intersectionality studies.”

## **PRODUCING NEW KNOWLEDGE: INTERSECTIONALITY AS AN ANALYTICAL STRATEGY**

Despite intersectionality’s ongoing definitional ambiguities, intersectionality as a field of study has catalyzed a copious outpouring of new knowledge, much of it produced by researchers, faculty members, and students who use intersectionality as an analytical strategy. Cho et al. (2013) view intersectionality as an analytical sensibility, arguing “what makes an analysis intersectional is not its use of the term ‘intersectionality,’ nor its being situated in a familiar genealogy, nor its drawing on lists of standard citations. Rather, what makes an analysis intersectional. . . is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (p. 795). Although the claim of an “analytic sensibility” is an improvement over merely “mentioning” intersectionality, both understandings resemble the “we know it when we see it” definitional approach.

Here I propose a way of proceeding that pushes beyond mere sensibility. Just as using Crenshaw to set intersectionality’s canonical boundaries may be premature, designating selected theories and methods, especially one’s own, as intersectional using an amorphous and perhaps idiosyncratic sensibility may be similarly shortsighted. Instead, examining patterns in the new knowledge that has been produced under the rubric of intersectionality as an analytical strategy may be more productive. The books, articles, conference papers, pamphlets, syllabi, and other products that claim intersectionality constitute data points that lend themselves to discourse analysis. Surveying the corpus of scholarship that draws upon intersectionality as an analytical strategy is daunting because intersectional publications are vast and growing exponentially (Collins & Chepp 2013). Because the field itself is dynamic, here I draw from my long-standing involvement within Black feminism, race/class/gender studies, and intersectionality to identify six selected focal points within intersectional literature that stand out for me. I present two questions: What themes characterize intersectional scholarship, and what assumptions might this disparate work share?

One important area of intersectional scholarship rethinks work, family, identity, the media, and similar core constructs. Work constitutes one important concept that contains highly nuanced scholarship on how labor market organization, occupational segregation, work-family balance, and other aspects of paid and unpaid reproductive labor underpin complex social inequalities. These topics have provided an especially rich terrain for intersectional scholarship from the race/class/gender period through contemporary analyses of global capitalism. Reflecting the social

movement origins of race/class/gender studies, early intersectional scholarship on work examined segmented labor markets and the ways in which women and people of color were shunted to bad jobs and dirty work (Amott & Matthaei 1991). Building on analyses of capitalism that examined how the good jobs and bad jobs of labor markets were organized using social inequalities of gender, race, and economic class, studies of domestic work in particular showed how work was central to the exploitation of women and men of color (Glenn 2002, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). This foundational scholarship on work foreshadowed important directions within contemporary social science research, such as Browne & Misra's (2003) intersection of race and gender in the labor market, Tomaskovic-Devey's (2014) analysis of the relational nature of workplace inequalities, Wingfield & Alston's (2012) intersectional work on African American professional men, and Duffy's (2007) work on paid reproductive labor.

A second area expands the focus on race, class, and gender to incorporate sexuality, nation, ethnicity, age, and ability as similar categories of analysis (Kim-Puri 2005). Specifically, a sustained attention to the themes of nation, nationalism, nation-state, and national identity has aimed to align the power relations of nation with structural analyses of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Yuval-Davis 1997). Literature on the nation-state and its citizenship policies has benefited from intersectional frameworks, e.g., the case of Goldberg's (2002) analysis of the racial state or Glenn's (2002) study of work, American citizenship, and nation-state power. Intersectional frameworks have also deepened our understanding of nationalist ideologies, as evidenced in Nagel's (1998) analysis of masculinity and nationalism or Mosse's (1985) classic work on nationalism and sexuality. The political behavior of subordinated groups as they aim to empower themselves has also garnered intersectional analysis; for example, Ramos-Zayas's (2003) ethnographic study of Puerto Rican identity within a Chicago neighborhood illustrates the benefits of incorporating nationalism into studies of local politics. Intersectional analyses of nation-state power have expanded to consider transnational processes, for example, placing analyses of tourism in the Bahamas within intersectional processes of erotic autonomy, decolonization, and nationalism (Alexander 1997, 2005).

A third area uses intersectional frameworks to rethink violence and similar social problems. Recasting violence as a social problem for many groups has catalyzed a broader conception of complex social inequalities and how heterogeneous forms of violence are essential in maintaining them (Collins 1998b). Because violence against women has been such a powerful catalyst for intersectionality itself, intersectional analyses of this topic not only are widespread but have informed political activism and public policy. Solutions to violence against women remain unlikely if violence against women is imagined through mono-categorical lenses such as gender lenses of male perpetrators and female victims or racial lenses that elevate police violence against Black men over domestic violence against Black women. Intersectional frameworks that analyze violence reappear across a wide array of topics such as violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan (Alinia 2013), nation-state violence of militarism and war (Peterson 2007), the treatment of sexual violence and ethnicity in international criminal law (Buss 2009), and hate speech itself as part of relations of violence (Matsuda et al. 1993).

A fourth area emphasizes identity. Identity has garnered considerable scholarly attention, ranging from a strong interest in the theme of studying how intersecting identities produce distinctive social experiences for specific individuals and social groups, to claims that intersectionality constitutes a feminist theory that deals with issues of identity (Goldberg 2009). In contrast, scholarship that examines identity in relation to social inequality, such as the possibilities of identity categories as potential coalitions (Carastathis 2013) or case studies on how attending to intersecting identities creates solidarity and cohesion for cross-movement mobilization (Roberts & Jesudason 2013), remains in the minority.



The fifth area critiques the epistemological workings of intersectionality itself. Here conceptualizations of intersectionality seem to be as varied as the individual scholars themselves. Intersectionality has been conceptualized as a perspective (Browne & Misra 2003, Steinbugler et al. 2006), a concept (Knapp 2005), a type of analysis (Nash 2008, Yuval-Davis 2006), or as a “nodal point” for feminist theorizing (Lykke 2011). Other scholars emphasize intersectionality’s placement in the research process, with some approaching intersectionality as a methodological approach (Steinbugler et al. 2006, Yuval-Davis 2006), a research paradigm (Hancock 2007b), or a measurable variable and a type of data (Bowleg 2008). Still, others draw upon existing social theories, aiming to deepen intersectionality’s analysis of inequality by bringing the field in alignment with complexity theory (Walby 2007).

Last, researchers remain preoccupied with questions of methodology. Because of the vacuum in scholarship that explicitly examines how intersectionality’s emphasis on relational thinking affects research methodology, McCall’s (2005) taxonomy of intersectional categorization has been widely taken up within the field. Similarly, extant literature on intersectionality, methodology, and empirical validity (see, e.g., Bowleg 2008; Hancock 2007a,b) is likely a response to the critique that intersectionality scholarship lacks a precise and diverse methodological approach (Nash 2008). When it comes to intersectionality and methodology, the core question concerns how intersectionality can be conceptualized within a particular research design that is attentive to the contradictions that characterize intersectional knowledge projects and that makes a good faith effort to deploy appropriate theories and methods in the face of such uncertainty. Looking beyond intersectionality’s mainstream, however, yields other epistemological insights. Feminist scholar Chela Sandoval (2000) contends that methodology is not politically impartial, proposing instead a “methodology of the oppressed.” Fonow & Cook’s (2005) analysis of feminist methodology remains especially useful in parsing out the distinctions among epistemology, methodology, and methods that might inform intersectionality as an analytical strategy.

Collectively, the patterns of emphasis (and the patterns of absence) within intersectional scholarship provide a template for seeing the benefits and costs of legitimation for intersectionality as a field of study. The benefits may be visible, but the costs are more difficult to identify without assessing how these particular focal points advance not only the interests and careers of particular scholars, but also intersectionality as a broader knowledge project. Seeing patterns of emphasis and absence can be difficult for a field with a constellation of knowledge projects that reflect the power relations that they study. For example, in the US context, intersectional scholarship on work and labor markets has the potential to influence public policy, yet doing so requires claiming particular perspectives on stratification and class. Class is routinely mentioned across intersectional scholarship, yet it remains underutilized as an analytical category to explain complex social inequalities. Writing in 1999, Acker (1999, p. 44) suggested that, with the development of postmodern/poststructuralist feminism, several leading feminist theorists turned to issues of culture, representation, and identity, in effect abandoning class as a central theoretical construct. By overemphasizing class as a descriptive category of economic stratification and underemphasizing class as an analytical category of economic relations, empirical scholarship that relies on descriptive analyses of class inadvertently elevates race and gender as explanatory categories while appearing to treat class in a similar fashion.

The European context reads race, class, and gender quite differently. In the European context of engagement with Marxist social thought, class analyses have long explained social inequality, leaving race and gender as descriptive interlopers. Yet reducing race to a descriptive identity category that is important to racial/ethnic minorities but not to mainstream scholarship leaves intersectional scholarship that privileges class incomplete. Elevating intersectionality sans race as a more theoretical and therefore preferred discourse on inequality erases racism, displacing its



effects onto the United States, South Africa, and similar color-conscious racial formations (Lewis 2013).

## Epistemological Challenges

Neither the new knowledge created within these areas of intersectional scholarship nor the research methodologies used to produce it stand outside power relations; both are deeply embedded in what they aim to study. Philosopher Kristie Dotson's (2013) analysis of epistemic oppression claims that knowledge is not politically neutral. Intersectionality would do well to consider how epistemic oppression might play out against and within its own parameters. When empirical work that claims to be using intersectionality fails to consider the epistemological assumptions of its own practice, such work can unwittingly uphold the same complex social inequalities that it aims to understand. Proceeding as though intersectionality, as much as any other theoretical framework, is already a social theory that can be used and critiqued within prevailing academic norms misreads this field.

In the same way that my earlier discussion of Black feminism and its shift to race/class/gender studies provided a context for the themes that characterized these projects, my selective rendition of how scholars use intersectionality as an analytical strategy constitutes a comparable preliminary entry point into similar epistemological terrain. The thematic emphases described above—(a) attending to social institutions such as work, (b) expanding systems of power beyond race, class, and gender, (c) applying an intersectional lens to social problems, (d) giving considerable attention to identity, and (e) casting a self-reflexive eye on intersectionality's epistemological and methodological issues—produce a loose set of guiding assumptions or guiding themes. Stated differently, based on a cursory survey of publications as data for analysis, these guiding assumptions may flesh out intersectionality's analytical sensibility discussed above. These guiding themes need not be present simultaneously, nor is each theme unique to intersectionality.

My reading of intersectional knowledge projects is that they embrace one, some combination, or all of the following provisional list of guiding assumptions:

- Race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and similar categories of analysis are best understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another.
- These mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power; the power relations of racism and sexism, for example, are interrelated.
- Intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them.
- Because social formations of complex social inequalities are historically contingent and cross-culturally specific, unequal material realities and social experiences vary across time and space.
- Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.
- The complex social inequalities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust, shaping knowledge projects and/or political engagements that uphold or contest the status quo.

The current unevenness across how scholars use intersectionality as an analytical strategy reflects differing degrees of emphasis on specific guiding assumptions. Some themes are definitely more popular than others. For example, work and identity constitute popular topics, whereas sustained attention to the connections between complex social inequalities and social justice is less

prominent. Overall, this provisional list of guiding assumptions is far from a working definition, but it does elucidate how intersectionality as an analytical strategy is unfolding.

But this all begs the underlying epistemological question of how these emerging patterns contribute to clarifying intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. One way to understand intersectionality as an analytical strategy is to place the earlier themes of community organizing, identity politics, coalitional politics, interlocking oppressions, and social justice in dialogue with the guiding assumptions of contemporary intersectional scholarship. Stuart Hall's construct of articulation may prove highly useful in examining the dynamic patterns of how scholars use intersectionality as an analytical strategy. Hall posits that a theory of articulation is "both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political struggles" (Grossberg 1996, pp. 141–42). Stated differently, how do and how might these two sets of ideas articulate to shape intersectionality's emerging canonical knowledge?

With hindsight, I see how this unanswered (and, some would say, unanswerable) question of how to articulate multiple points of view on intersectionality frames its definitional dilemmas. Yet the epistemological issues that affect any use of intersectionality as an analytical strategy may take a different form outside the scholarly requirements of the academy. When it comes to intersectionality as critical praxis, practitioners might use both sets of ideas differently.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE? INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FORM OF CRITICAL PRAXIS

In 2013, I delivered a keynote address on US Black feminism and intersectionality at the Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean Women's Festival in Brasilia, Brazil. A small group of Afro-Brazilian women scholar-activists approached me after my talk (Collins 2012). They were surprised by my argument that US Black feminism and intersectionality were interconnected knowledge projects, stating bluntly, "We thought intersectionality was for white feminists and that it had nothing to do with us." In our discussion, I learned how their experiences resonated not just with the guiding assumptions that shape contemporary intersectional scholarship on work, social issues such as violence, and the significance of identity politics, but also with the broader themes from US Black feminism as a social justice project. They seemed to be working within one particular space of articulation between, on the one hand, the core ideas that I have attributed to US Black feminism and race/class/gender studies and, on the other hand, the guiding assumptions that I identified via a preliminary content analysis of intersectional scholarship. Ironically, their interpretive community advanced an intersectional knowledge project that did not claim the term intersectionality.

For these scholar-activists, intersectionality as a form of critical praxis made sense for their social justice projects aimed at remedying complex social inequalities. Despite their suspicions of intersectionality, they understood how using a more expansive understanding of intersectionality potentially constituted an important tool for political engagement. This connection between social justice and remedying complex social inequalities seems more prominent outside academic settings than within them. Once I became more mindful of how practitioners were using intersectionality, even when, as in this case, it was not called intersectionality, I encountered different patterns of articulation between understandings of intersectionality.

Practitioners are often frontline actors for solving social problems that are clearly linked to complex social inequalities, a social location that predisposes them to respond to intersectionality as critical praxis. Teachers, social workers, parents, policy advocates, university support staff, community organizers, clergy, lawyers, graduate students, and nurses often have an up close and personal relationship to violence, homelessness, hunger, illiteracy, poverty, sexual assault, and

similar phenomena. Intersectionality is not simply a field of study to be mastered or an analytical strategy for understanding; rather, intersectionality as critical praxis sheds light on the doing of social justice work. As was the case for intersectional scholarship, the types of actions that characterize intersectionality as critical praxis are vast. Again, I offer suggestive avenues of investigation.

Local, grassroots, small-scale, and/or temporary groups that draw upon intersectionality to guide their critical praxis can often escape public notice. Typically, these groups are composed of society's overlooked populations, specifically the young, women, people of color, and poor people. Yet groups such as these have a vested interest in drawing upon intersectional frameworks to address social inequalities. For example, Clay's (2012) study of youth activism in Oakland, California, shows how young people of color draw upon intersectional frameworks to confront the persisting inequalities in schooling that face them. Similarly, Harrison's (2009) research on the hip-hop underground in San Francisco reveals how a multiethnic group of youth renegotiate racial identifications within a performative place of poetry and politics. Both studies show how young people engage intersectionality as critical praxis in venues that often escape scholarly scrutiny.

In some cases, social institutions do aim to make intersectionality as critical praxis central to their organizational mission and practice. For example, Simon Fraser University's Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) initiative, housed at the Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, aims to generate research with direct applicability to Canadian health policy. Because public health remains connected to the practices of health care professionals, the challenge for this field lies in integrating intersectional frameworks into both health care delivery practices and public policies. Aiming to make their materials user friendly to stakeholders in health policy arenas, the IBPA organizers developed an iterative, participatory process that involves researchers, practitioners, and consumers. The mission statements from the IBPA illustrate the aspirations of social actors who wish to bring intersectionality into public policy areas: "IBPA provides a new and effective method for understanding the varied equity-relevant implications of policy and for promoting equity-based improvements and social justice within an increasingly diverse and complex population base" (Hankivsky 2012, p. 33).

Human rights is another vitally important area for intersectionality as critical praxis. The ideas expressed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights bear a strong family resemblance to strands of intersectionality that are aligned with social justice initiatives. Article 1 affirms that all human beings "are born free and equal in dignity and rights"; Article 2 states everyone "is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (Freeman 2011, p. 5). Yet because the protected categories gain meaning only in relation to one another, actualizing human rights means transcending the limitations of a strictly legal statement of human rights. Intersectionality potentially helps address three main concerns. First, human rights requires more effective tools for identifying the kinds of distinctions that constitute discrimination. In a world where petitions for human rights violations could be brought under various categories, conceptualizing discrimination becomes important. When discrimination is legally framed either by sex or gender or race, how does one best serve people who bring claims that touch on more than one area? Second, there is the need for better assessments of pain, suffering, and injury. What types of pain and suffering are appropriate for bringing forth a human rights claim? In what ways do questions of human dignity matter? The third concern is the search for appropriate reparations and remedies to victims of human rights abuses. What are state responsibilities if harm has been documented and suffering has occurred?

Despite its ubiquity, intersectionality as critical praxis remains underemphasized within intersectionality as a field of study and within scholarship that draws on intersectionality as an analytical strategy. This underemphasis may be due in part because these areas valorize studying or writing

about intersectionality over practicing it. In addition, the underemphasis on intersectionality as critical praxis within academia most likely reflects efforts to avoid the implicit political implications of intersectionality itself. The qualifier *critical* is important. Practitioners who would be drawn to intersectionality as critical praxis seek knowledge projects that take a stand; such projects would critique social injustices that characterize complex social inequalities, imagine alternatives, and/or propose viable action strategies for change.

The value of critical praxis reflects the norms of any given interpretive community. For example, from her pathbreaking work on women, race, and class to her sustained attention to prison abolition, the storied career of Angela Davis (1981, 2012) speaks to a sustained engagement with intersectionality as critical praxis. Yet on the basis of their respective agendas, activist and scholarly circles can interpret Davis's intellectual production differently. In scholarly settings, the critical dimensions of Davis's work open her up to accusations of bias—her analyses of capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, and prisons can read as too polemical and therefore unscholarly. In contrast, in activist venues searching for a critical analysis of social inequality, these same ideas remain well-received, precisely because her work remains critical. Davis's stature as a public intellectual has provided a platform for her ideas, making it difficult if not impossible to exclude them from academic venues. Increasingly, intersectionality's ideas can travel across diverse interpretive communities, a shift that has important implications for intersectionality as critical praxis. The changing political economy of publishing and social media provides new venues for circulating intersectional analyses both outside and inside academia. For example, Canadian activist Harsha Walia's (2013) analysis of border imperialism is written for, not about, activists. Her book is unlikely to be selected for ASA sessions on "Intersectionality" or to appear as assigned reading on course syllabi. Yet critical scholarship linked to critical practice such as this is also part of a broader intersectional knowledge project that increasingly transcends the traditional boundaries of academic projects. Scholars may know less about intersectionality as critical praxis simply because they fail to look for it.

When it comes to intersectionality's definitional dilemmas, much is at stake. As Carbado (2013) points out, "Scholars across the globe regularly invoke and draw upon intersectionality, as do human rights activists, community organizers, political figures and lawyers. Any theory that traverses such transdemographic terrains is bound to generate controversy and contestation" (p. 811). Despite the visibility of scholars as the public face of intersectionality, practitioners such as hip-hop poets, Afro-Brazilian feminists, IBPA scholar-activists, and intellectual activists such as Angela Davis and Harsha Walia may be equally if not more likely to put forth the innovative, cutting-edge intersectional analyses that will advance the field. In this context, intersectionality as a knowledge project faces the fundamental challenge of sustaining its critical edge. Holding fast to the creativity of this dynamic area of inquiry and practice yet finding a common language that will be useful to its practitioners *is* the cutting-edge definitional dilemma for intersectionality.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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