PART 2

Liberatory epistemologies and axes of oppression
Intersectionality constitutes a provocative site for examining how ideas are taken up by different sets of social actors, but also how resistant knowledges change as they navigate heterogeneous social contexts. As a knowledge project, intersectionality repeatedly crosses an important political, social and epistemological border: its social actors are distributed within both social movement settings and academic venues. This border-crossing is not unidirectional – either from social movements into the academy or vice versa – and placement within these overlapping and often contentious fields of power means that intersectionality is always under construction. Neither inherently beneficial nor harmful, travelling across academic borders generates new opportunities and constraints (Carbado 2013). Yet increasingly, academics and activists have expressed reservations about the ways in which intersectionality has changed, specifically, the deterioration of the emancipatory possibilities of Black feminism and intersectionality within the academy (Alexander-Floyd 2012), and the academic misrecognition and misappropriation of intersectionality (Mohanty 2013).

No agreed-upon definition currently characterizes intersectionality, yet a general consensus exists about its 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 rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (Collins 2015). In prior work, I have examined the contours of intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis (Collins and Bilge 2016, 31–63); analyzed intersectionality’s ideas core within scholarly research (Collins and Chepp 2013); provided an overview of how social actors in human rights, social media, social movements and similar non-academic settings use intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 2016, 88–114, 136–159); and compared how conceptions of intersectionality differ in social movement and academic settings (Collins 2015). In this essay, I explore one component of this larger venture by examining how intersectionality’s travels into academia shed light on two different forms of epistemic injustice: (1) the epistemic injustices that intersectional approaches are responding to, diagnosing, and offering critical tools to address and fight, and (2) the epistemic injustices that are committed within the academy against scholar-activists who claim intersectionality.
Crossing epistemic borders: intersectionality and Black feminism

Contemporary narratives routinely identify Kimberlé Crenshaw’s ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color’ as an important point of origin for intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). Yet Crenshaw’s 1991 article also highlights a significant juncture where the fluid borders that distinguished the epistemic communities of social activists and academics in the 1980s solidified and became increasingly difficult to traverse. As Crenshaw’s analysis reminds us, the term intersectionality emerged in this border space between Black feminism and similar social movements and a desegregating of colleges and universities that incorporated African Americans, Latinos/as, women and other historically excluded groups. The term intersectionality seemingly captured the border crossing of the times. Yet Crenshaw’s positioning of intersectionality in an ever-changing border zone of social activism and academic politics has been overshadowed by the increasingly common practice of situating intersectionality’s origins within academia. Crenshaw’s name is appropriated and circulated as a decontextualized brand for intersectionality, one invoked by oft-repeated statements that Crenshaw ‘coined’ the term intersectionality. The overreliance on a ‘coining’ metaphor belies the importance of intersectionality before its academic discovery and assigns value to intersectionality when it became an academic commodity.

Crenshaw’s work constitutes neither an end point nor a point of origin for intersectionality, but rather an important turning point in intersectionality’s engagement with social action within academic settings. Intersectionality was changed by its entrance into academic epistemic communities, primarily its engagement with practices of epistemic injustice. Moreover, African American women and similarly situated subjects encountered strategies of epistemic injustice that questioned their authority as knowers.

Black feminism, social justice and political activism: social movement frameworks

Examining the treatment of social justice within mid-twentieth century Black feminism in social movement settings sheds light on this turning point for intersectionality and its engagement with epistemic injustice. Despite African American women’s heterogeneous understandings of Black feminism, the idea of social justice was paramount. Toni Cade Bambara’s groundbreaking edited volume, The Black Woman, illustrates how African American women conceptualized social justice from different points of view (Bambara 1970). Building on this foundation, in 1982, the Combahee River Collective’s ‘A Black Feminist Statement’ laid out a more comprehensive statement of the framework that had permeated Black feminist politics (Combahee-River-Collective 1995 [1977]). This innovative 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 what had been treated as separate systems of oppression were interconnected. Because racism, class exploitation, patriarchy and homophobia collectively shaped Black women’s experiences, Black women’s liberation required a comprehensive response to multiple systems of oppression. The Statement also developed a comprehensive argument about the necessity of identity politics for Black women’s empowerment (Collins and Bilge 2016, 67–71).

Works such as The Black Woman and the CRC Statement foreshadowed important ideas within intersectional knowledge projects, namely, the interconnections among truth, ethics and politics. What sense would it make for Black women to understand the truth of their lives without social justice as an ethical touchstone for action and political action to foster social justice in their lives?
Moreover, because social justice was intricately linked to epistemic justice, testifying on one’s own behalf within Black feminism not only produced new knowledge from Black women’s standpoint, but this exercise of epistemic agency challenged prevailing practices of epistemic injustice.

During the 1980s, Black women, many of whom were political activists, obtained academic positions and brought ideas from Black feminist politics with them (Collins 2000). Joining other social actors with similar social, political and epistemological aspirations, these social actors established an array of interdisciplinary fields with social justice at their core (Parker and Samantrai 2010). This context catalyzed a nascent race/class/gender studies with a dual epistemological focus – responding to academic norms about what constituted credible scholarship and who was authorized to do it, and responding to the patterns of similarities and differences of heterogeneous social justice projects concerning race, class, gender and sexuality (Dill 2009).

Scholar-activists within race/class/gender projects in the academy found themselves explaining and often defending three taken-for-granted assumptions from social movement settings. First, a commitment to social justice constituted a foundational premise of race/class/gender studies that needed neither justification nor explanation. Social justice could not be imagined as a thing, but rather constituted an essential ethical goal to which individuals could commit in the here and now in working toward a better future. Second, understanding and reducing social inequality constituted a core objective of race/class/gender studies. Because social problems such as violence, hunger, illiteracy, poor health and unemployment were indicators of social inequality across individual and group difference, addressing social problems both lay at the heart of the field and served as an important site for coalitions among social actors who historically had worked in separate venues. Finally, the belief in political action to bring about social change had to be defended in academic venues. If social justice was less a finished ideological product than a process, then moving toward social justice required political action. Social problems and social inequality were the catalysts, social justice the ethical principle, and political action the action strategy.

Like similar interdisciplinary social justice projects, race/class/gender studies found itself fighting for space and legitimation within academic venues (Parker and Samantrai 2010). During this period, race/class/gender studies served as a sort of clearing house for an array of projects that brought new ideas to the field from scholar-activists working on sexuality, ethnicity, ability and citizenship. The prospects for coalitional politics among such disparate groups and projects transcended the fuzzy borders of race/class/gender studies. The term intersectionality might bring an array of scholar-activists and traditional academic actors together under one rubric.

Institutional incorporation: intersectionality, social justice and political activism

Few dispute intersectionality’s appearance as an important discourse as well as Crenshaw’s significance in elevating intersectionality’s visibility and importance. Initially, the crystallization of the far-flung set of ideas and actors associated with race/class/gender studies under the rubric of intersectionality showed promise. Intersectionality’s claimants could move beyond open-ended yet cumbersome race/class/gender frameworks and toward greater clarity and new ideas. Moreover, because the term intersectionality seemingly addressed a certain set of intellectual and political challenges within academia in the 1990s, it survived.

The term intersectionality simultaneously created possibilities for new ways of thinking, yet homogenized the field by silencing, erasing and thereby marginalizing some perspectives. Neo-liberal influences on higher education may have set the stage for intersectionality’s complex border crossing, yet epistemic injustice contributed to the specific trajectories that intersectionality
actually took. Social actors who crossed the borders from social movement to academic settings encountered contradictory epistemological frameworks that distinguished social activism from academic politics. In social movement settings, social actors could continue to link intersectionality with politics and to claim a social justice mandate as a core principle of intersectionality itself. Yet once inside the academy, these actors discovered that political action and taking principled positions became objectionable because they seemingly opposed norms of scholarly objectivity. Moreover, intersectionality seemed to travel more smoothly through the academy when Black women and other subordinated social actors minimized forms of knowing that empowered them in social movement settings. Ignoring intersectionality’s roots in social activism, social actors eschewed direct confrontation with Black women and similar social actors but rather used indirect but effective epistemic arguments to attack the identity politics of social activism. What remained was pressure to produce a depoliticized version of intersectionality that was individualized and fragmenting. How did this happen?

**Intersectionality and epistemic injustice**

Epistemology may appear to be the great equalizer within academic settings, yet placing epistemology beyond the boundaries of politics and ethics militates against seeing how hegemonic understandings of intellectual work reproduce social inequality. Once within the academy, intersectionality had to navigate contradictory epistemological frameworks. It drew from both expansive understandings of epistemology within Black feminism and race/class/gender studies that laid claim to social justice and political action, as well as storied and more proscribed academic definitions of epistemology that elevated the search for truth above ethics and politics. As Medina points out, ‘a narrow conception of epistemology restricted to issues of justification of knowledge claims . . . is impotent, ineffectual, and always arrives too late’ (Medina 2013, 253).

Three important dimensions of epistemic injustice shed light on intersectionality’s trajectories within academia. First, when it comes to social inequality, epistemologies are not epiphenomena but rather constitute core structuring dimensions of social institutions and practices. Second, hegemonic epistemologies are not situated outside of politics, but rather are embedded within and help construct the political. Third, accomplishing social inequality relies upon strategies of epistemic injustice that collectively reproduce epistemic oppression. Collectively, these dimensions of epistemic injustice provide different lenses for analyzing why and how intersectionality changed as it travelled into the academy.

Epistemic oppression constitutes a core defining feature of intersecting systems of power, a fact made visible by intersectionality’s border-crossing from epistemic communities of social activism to those defining academic norms. The construct of epistemic oppression identifies how epistemology constitutes a structuring dimension of social injustice beyond actual ideas of racism, sexism and similar ideological systems (Dotson 2014). This concept has been fertile ground for intersectional scholar-activists: Barbara Tomlinson analyzes how a dominant racial frame that denies the continuation of racism suppresses the conceptual tools for analyzing racism and contributes to a colonization of intersectionality (Tomlinson 2013a), and Vivian May examines how often deeply entrenched ways of thinking are used to critique intersectionality, even as intersectionality scholars have criticized these same tools as fostering misrepresentation, erasure and violation (May 2014). By providing the frames that shape all aspects of scholarly processes, epistemic oppression go beyond the simpl bias of any group of social actors.

Epistemic oppression relies on specific strategies that reproduce social inequality. Both explicit but more often implicit within colorblind and gender-neutral social relations of post-raciality and post-feminism, these recurring strategies of epistemic injustice discipline social actors into
taken-for-granted epistemological frameworks. Intersectional scholars have questioned this disciplinary process, more recently identifying specific practices of constructing truths about intersectionality itself misrepresent and thereby restrain its radical potential (Tomlinson 2013b). Joining this literature with that of the tactics of epistemic oppression, for example, epistemic violence and how epistemic agency is quieted or smothered adds to the growing tool kit of analyzing intersectionality’s current status and future prospects. This broader landscape of epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice provides new tools for understanding intersectionality.

Epistemic violence within intersectionality: identity politics and standpoint epistemology

In a context of legal equality, discrediting Black women and similarly subordinated people as epistemic agents happens less by direct confrontation and increasingly by eroding their epistemic authority by indirectly attacking their credibility. In the 1990s, intersectionality gained legitimacy within the academy, yet its claims regarding social justice and political action remained antithetical to academic norms. Painting identity politics as an inferior form of politics and standpoint epistemology as a limited and potentially biased form of knowing illustrates this general practice of discrediting the epistemic agency of oppressed subjects. Excising these forms of epistemic agency from intersectionality enabled a more acceptable and sanitized intersectionality to emerge that was more closely aligned with academic epistemic norms.

Identity politics and standpoint epistemology constitute two important forms of authorization for people of color, women, poor people and new immigrant populations that constitute sources of epistemic authority (Collins 1998, 201–228). Identity politics claims the authority of one’s own experiences and social location as a source of epistemic agency. Standpoint epistemology asserts the right to be an equal epistemic agent in interpreting one’s own realities within interpretive communities. Standpoint theories claim, in different ways, that it is important to account for the social positioning of social agents. Within standpoint epistemology, the process of approximating the truth is part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are different situated (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002, 315).

Misinterpreting the robust understanding of identity politics expressed by the Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw and others by recasting these ideas as essentialized and self-serving not only misreads the intent of social movement actors, it undercuts an important source of epistemic agency for oppressed groups. Crenshaw’s groundbreaking article on intersectionality ironically contains an extensive, analytical examination of identity politics that takes it seriously. Crenshaw’s article engages intersectionality in relation to identity politics, interrogating its strengths and limitations for social action by and behalf of women of color. Yet the discourse on identity politics that potentially empowers subordinated groups disappears within a linguistic shift from collective identity to multiple subjectivities. Individualizing identities reduces race, class, gender and sexuality to dimensions of intersecting subjectivities managed by each unique individual. This substitution shorn of historic context of racism or sexism, for example, first replaces a robust framework of identity politics with individualistic and non-structural analysis of social inequalities, then criticizes intersectionality’s emphasis on identity as problematic.

This persistent erasure and misrecognition of Crenshaw’s work, e.g., claiming the ‘coins’ yet rejecting the identity politics, constitutes epistemic violence, namely, a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another
person (or sets of persons). Reliable ignorance is ignorance that is consistent or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources. 

(Dotson 2011, 238–239)

Persistent, reliable ignorance neither occurs in a vacuum nor is it a harmless expression of free speech among scholars who agree to disagree. Dotson points out that determining whether a situation constitutes epistemic violence requires ‘an analysis of power relations and other contextual factors that make the ignorance identified in that particular circumstance or set of circumstances harmful’ (Dotson 2011, 239). The stock story of intersectionality that ignores the agency of Black women prior to intersectionality’s naming serves the vested interests of people who are empowered by different epistemic practices. Similarly, the misreading of a collective identity politics within settings of social activism enables academics to advance a politics of individual identity that depoliticizes intersectionality by rendering its social justice politics suspect. Through bait and switch, an emphasis on individual identities severed from collective politics increasingly dominates intersectional discourse, with many of intersectionality’s practitioners thinking that intersectionality is a theory of multiple identities (Collins and Bilge 2016, 114–135). In this context, the shrinking emphasis on social justice passes virtually unnoticed.

The related attacks on standpoint epistemology in the 1990s stem from similar epistemic sources yet illustrate a different path of deflection. Again, the attacks cannot be made via direct confrontation with Black women and women of color who were clearly central to intersectionality’s inception because that would call the standpoints of more privileged academics into question. Instead, the criticisms of standpoint epistemology operate in the abstract terrain of epistemology itself. Such standpoints were accused of suffering from limited vision and bias, and being a compromised way of moving toward truth. Yet the purpose of standpoint epistemology was never to become a theory of truth. Rather, it valorized the role of reflective, analytical thought that was grounded in power relations. Elite academics feared being displaced by standpoints that they could not have or control. So the entire endeavor of having standpoints at all had to be discredited.

Versions of intersectionality’s stock story that discredit identity politics and standpoint epistemology perform epistemological gate keeping that erases and sanitizes the radical potential of a more-unruly intersectionality and installs a more orderly, recognizable, disciplined intersectionality in its place. Within intersectionality, some scholars want to claim the legitimacy of intersectionality as a recognized scholarly perspective while leaving the subordinated people who created it behind (see, e.g., Nash 2008). In its place, they wish to install a new narrative of intersectionality that privileges academic norms of objectivity and truth. More importantly, just as tactics of violence police political and social borders between privileged and disadvantaged people, epistemic violence emerges to police the border between academics and activism. Intersectionality could not be evicted from the academy. Instead, it had to be contained and changed. Claiming the ethical position of intersectionality’s ties with social justice without doing the political work to bring it about suggests that intersectionality need not do anything about social injustice, rather be seen as an icon of social justice.

Who gets to tell intersectionality’s story?
Testimonial practices of quieting and smothering

Epistemic oppression suppresses the epistemic agency of some members of the group while elevating that of others, thus producing privileged and derogated categories of knowers. Within interpretive communities that express a shared commitment to social justice, all members
Intersectionality and epistemic injustice

theoretically have equitable access to testimonial recognition. They should participate equitably albeit differently in intersectionality’s knowledge production and, if required, enjoy access to epistemic authority to shape intersectionality’s definitions (Dotson 2012, 24). Yet this theoretical model of democratic communities of scholars based on testimonial inclusivity bears little resemblance to actual academic communities characterized by epistemic injustice. Through their epistemic practices, interpretive communities regulate and reproduce relationships of unequal epistemic agency among group members.

Because intersectionality has long been associated with social justice, if not assumed to be essentially about social justice, the question of intersectionality’s contributions to epistemic oppression by its own epistemic agents becomes especially important. Intersectionality within the academy faces a conundrum: its legitimation and success privilege some epistemic agents – the case, for example, of epistemic agents who enjoy an elevated status because they reject identity politics and/or standpoint epistemology – and increasingly marginalize and subsequently silence epistemic agents within intersectionality as an interpretive community who claim these same sources of epistemic empowerment. What epistemic tools regulate these unequal power relations within intersectionality as an epistemic community? Specifically, what tactics or strategies foster the suppression of the epistemic agency of Black women, women of color and similar social actors who brought the ideas of intersectionality into the academy and fought for the institutionalization of those ideas?

Interpretive communities organized by the testimonial practices of its members socially construct intersectionality. Testimonial practices can occur through face-to-face interaction, but because interpretive communities within academia are typically imagined communities of putative equals, testimonial interactions often happen in more mediated ways. Practices such as patterns of citation, themes of journal articles, articles selected for, invitations to deliver keynote addresses and the composition of panels at academic conferences collectively shape the testimonial contours of intersectionality’s interpretive community. Through these mechanisms, and not primarily through face-to-face interaction, being able to control the narrative about intersectionality enables some actors to endorse aspects of intersectionality that reinforce their own point of view while ignoring and suppressing alternative perspectives. Some actors become more authoritative to speak or testify about intersectionality because they silence others. Epistemic violence operates through practices of silencing (Dotson 2011).

Intersectionality’s travels from social movement settings into academia not only reveal epistemological assumptions concerning social justice and political action, they also suggest how established testimonial relationships within the academy reproduce epistemic inequality, for example, those identifying white males as more authoritative than everyone else, and theoretical knowledge as better than practical experience. Social movements fostered an important epistemic upheaval regarding testimony concerning oppressions of race, gender, class and ethnicity. The metaphor of gaining ‘voice’ versus achieving visibility speaks to the connections between speech and epistemic agency. People who had been deemed objects of academic knowledge reclaimed epistemic agency in their own behalf.

In the academy, social actors who have been rendered voiceless within established patterns of epistemic oppression confront the challenge of exercising epistemic agency within intersectionality’s big academic tent. Because academics are neither equal in their ability to give testimony nor do they receive testimony in the same way, speaking from the bottom takes more skill and effort than speaking from the top. Race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality, singularly and in varying combinations, structure social interactions, not solely in the abstract, but also by structuring the social inequalities within colleges and universities. As a result, normative and ostensibly normal epistemological practices privilege the epistemic agency of well-established social actors.
Two practices of epistemic violence illuminate how and why some aspects of intersectionality became so well-known, thus rendering other aspects virtually unknown. One consists of testimonial quieting that fundamentally ignores what less powerful epistemic agents say: ‘A speaker needs an audience to identify, or at least recognize, her as a knower in order to offer testimony. This kind of testimonial oppression has long been discussed in the work of women of color’ (Dotson 2011, 242). The other, testimonial smothering, occurs by ‘the truncating of one’s own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competency’ (Dotson 2011, 244). Testimonial quieting and smothering go hand in hand – those who are repeatedly told to ‘be quiet’ by more powerful social actors quickly learn the protections of self-censorship.

In intersectionality’s case, deciding that began when Crenshaw ‘coined’ the term in the early 1990s simply stopped the clock. Thirty years of social movement activism was off the table, thus suppressing the epistemic agency of many Black women and making Crenshaw intersectionality’s designated academic spokesperson. This is a stunning example of testimonial quieting – simply ignoring the historical record and letting it drop from sight to allow other issues to come to the forefront.

Moreover, because testimonial quieting and smothering together reinforce reliable and pernicious ignorance about intersectionality itself, it’s hard to tell how many Black women, Latinas and similar social actors self-censor themselves in response to the repeated calls to ‘explain’ intersectionality itself. Because intersectionality is so vast, a thorough analysis of practices of coerced silencing within it awaits completion. Tactics of testimonial smothering within intersectionality can best be traced by the thematic mapping of scholarly publications that claim intersectionality in some fashion since its naming. This mapping would embed a thematic analysis within the testimonial community of intersectionality as evidenced by how this idea unfolded within journals, textbooks, conference proceedings, edited volumes and solo-authored monographs. This analysis would take note of certain stylistic practices, for example, the ‘mentioning’ of Crenshaw’s work as an agreed upon proxy. The challenge is to shift Dotson’s analysis of coerced silencing and testimonial smothering as a form of self-censorship from the level of the individual to the structural group processes of intersectionality as an interpretive community.

An obligation to resist? Social injustice and epistemic resistance

Neither social justice nor political action have vanished from intersectionality in the academy. Despite epistemic violence and practices of quieting and smothering, many social actors both inside and outside the academy refuse to relinquish a commitment to social justice and to the political action required to bring it about. For many subordinated people, identity politics and the distinctive standpoints on social inequality that it engenders remain important tools of empowerment, especially outside the academy (see, e.g., the discussion of hip hop and intersectionality in Collins and Bilge 2016, 116–123).

Intersectionality within the academy currently has a heterogeneous testimonial community with differently empowered epistemic actors expressing various forms of agency. On the one hand, some community members interpret the waning focus on social justice and political action as a good thing, in much the same way that the shift from race, class and gender studies to the broader and seemingly more universal construct of intersectionality moved this field of inquiry away from its particularistic roots. Dominant epistemologies value decontextualized, abstract, objective and ostensibly universal knowledge, and historically fields that have proven their connections to these constructs have gained legitimacy over those that do not. Moreover, within an academy that seemingly valorizes objectivity as the antidote to bias, knowledge that seems
unduly political or politicized (unless it represents the interests of those in power) is typically delegitimized. For those who strive for academic legitimation, intersectionality’s ties to an ethics of social justice and a politics of action weaken it.

On the other hand, academic norms that interpret political action as biased and outside the purview of the academy make it more difficult to argue that intersectionality should examine epistemic injustice. Why worry about epistemic injustice within intersectionality’s own practices if social justice is no longer central to its academic mission? Intersectionality’s commitment to truth is certainly worth-while. Yet this pressure to sever truth from ethics and politics can in fact reduce intersectionality to a ‘buzzword,’ a discourse that is popular precisely because it can be so easily incorporated in academic norms yet with boundaries maintained by tactics of testimonial quieting and smothering dissent.

Given these contested relations, do social agents who lay claim to intersectionality from diverse social locations within the field have an obligation to resist social inequality? Medina argues that those of us who claim intersectionality are interconnected, and that we are each responsible for resisting oppression: ‘those who live under conditions of oppression – however they happen to inhabit contexts of domination (as victim, as a bystander, as both victim and oppressor, etc.) – have an obligation to resist’ (Medina 2013, 16). Yet because we each stand in a different relationship to intersectionality, we have an obligation to resist differently. Assuming that oppressed people bear the burden of making changes, by themselves, and that everyone else can either study the efforts of the oppressed or cheer them on from the sidelines undermines the field. Paying lip service to social justice is easy – figuring out how to do the hard political work of challenging epistemic inequality within epistemic practices requires far more diligence.

Related chapters: 2, 3, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 37

References


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