FOREWORD

Emerging Intersections—Building Knowledge and Transforming Institutions

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

As thinkers and practitioners, Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth E. Zambrana have been actively engaged in nurturing intersectionality since its inception. For Dill and Zambrana, intersectionality constitutes “an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality, transforming knowledges as well as the social institutions in which they have found themselves.” This expansive definition, one that links knowledge and power, research and policy, the individual and the collective, captures the spirit of intersectionality as it unfolded in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Unlike scholarly dilettantes who perpetually chase scholarly fads, Dill and Zambrana have been patiently, and some would say heroically, laboring for several decades to develop our understanding of intersectionality as a critical analytic lens that serves social justice. *Emerging Intersections* encompasses one important project that reflects the larger corpus of their work.

Despite the widespread belief that intersectionality has arrived, I think that it is important to stop and recognize that this way of looking at and living within the world constitutes a new area of inquiry that is still in its infancy. Moreover, because this field remains both staunchly interdisciplinary and committed to claiming the much-neglected space of praxis (one where transforming ideas and institutions inform one another), from its inception intersectionality set a seemingly impossible high bar for itself. Given its high initial aspirations and the way they have played out, *Emerging Intersections* can serve as an important guidepost to mark the trajectory of intersectional scholarship and practice. This volume can help us look backward in order to interrogate past ideals and practices as well as forward in order to imagine potential directions and future

achievements. In short, the volume raises three core questions. What have we learned from the early decades of the field of intersectionality? Given its past, what directions might this field that is still in its infancy now take? Furthermore how might practitioners who are doing intersectional scholarship and/or activism continue to move the field forward?

As to the first core question, what might *Emerging Intersections* tell us about past practices of intersectional inquiry? In the greatly changed political and intellectual context of the early twenty-first century, revisiting and clarifying the initial impetus and vision that accompanied this critical analytic lens of intersectionality becomes especially prescient. We need to remember that such a wide range of scholar/activists developed various aspects of this approach through the 1970s and 1980s that, when Kimberlé Crenshaw penned the term “intersectionality” in 1991, she basically named a heterogeneous set of practices that had gone on for some time (Crenshaw, 1991). She argued, quite convincingly, that understandings of violence against women would be limited unless one took into consideration the race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and class of women who were targets of violence. Crenshaw pointed out how programs that were developed via gender-only frameworks were narrow at best, and deeply flawed at worst, because they failed to take into consideration how intersecting power relations of race, class, immigrant status, and gender affected women’s options. More importantly, Crenshaw saw knowledge and hierarchical power relations as co-constituted—the very frameworks that shaped understandings of violence against women simultaneously influenced both the violence itself as well as organizational responses to it. In this regard, social institutions were limited if they did not take intersectional analyses into account.

Crenshaw was not alone in calling for intersectional analyses of social problems and the knowledge/power relations that catalyzed them. As discussed in Dill and Zambrana’s introduction to this volume, many thinkers and activists set out to transform a host of institutional practices and knowledges via a newfound and seemingly expansive framework of intersectionality. From its inception, intersectionality took up the social problems that most affected those most harmed by inequalities—poverty, poor education, substandard healthcare, inadequate housing, and violence all became rethought through a lens of intersecting power relations of race, class, and gender. It soon became apparent that it was not enough to use an intersectional framework to understand specific social problems—one could also begin to ask the big questions of how racism and sexism were co-constituted, how class and heterosexism mutually constructed one another, and how citizenship status (nationality) articulated with issues of ability and age. In essence, intersectionality increasingly took on the big question of the very meaning of power itself. Intersectionality also went beyond simple understanding of either social issues or

social structures. Its focus remained staunchly on engaging in a host of projects that might foster social justice. Thus, from its inception, intersectionality was not a theory of truth, a form of academic currency to be brokered for the next scholarly publication, with the implications of scholarship neatly severed from the lives of the people who were forced to live with its consequences. Instead intersectionality mattered in real people's lives and tried to keep this expansive understanding of social relations in mind.

For me, the 1970s and 1980s were the heady days of intersectional scholarship, a time when the critical analytical lens of intersectionality was attuned to assessing significant social issues, thinking through the mechanisms of intersecting systems of power themselves, and/or trying to do something about social inequalities. Ironically some view Crenshaw's 1991 piece coining the term "intersectionality" as intersectionality's coming of age, yet this moment can also be interpreted as launching a decade where the initial vision of intersectionality became increasingly drowned out by a new set of social meanings and practitioners. Today, for many practitioners, the spirit of adhering to an intersectional framework may remain the same, yet both the interpretive context in which such work occurs as well as the object of analysis has shifted. In recent years, intersectional analyses have far too often turned inward, to the level of personal identity narratives, in part, because intersectionality can be grasped far more easily when constructing one's own autobiography. This stress on identity narratives, especially individual identity narratives, does provide an important contribution to fleshing out our understandings of how people experience and construct identities within intersecting systems of power. Yet this turning inward also reflects the shift within American society away from social structural analyses of social problems, for example, the role of schools, prisons, and workplace practices in producing poverty, and the growing rejection of institutional responses to social inequalities, e.g., how governmental social policies might address this intractable social problem. Unfortunately the ascendancy in the 1990s within the American academy of poststructuralist social theory has of yet done little to slow down this erasure of social structure. Despite their appeal, ideas of performativity, social constructionism, and discourse analysis have not garnered any substantive changes in the organizations and social institutions that continue to reproduce racism, sexism, class exploitation, heterosexism, and the like.

Emerging Intersections appears within these crosscutting political and intellectual trends and thus debuts during a critical historical moment for the field of intersectionality. By showcasing in one place how social science research might continue to use the critical analytical lens provided by intersectionality, this volume refocuses attention to social structural analysis of inequality, in particular, the organizational and institutional manifestations of power hierarchies and their effects upon individuals and groups. Taking

this stance during the contemporary period is not easy—theoretical arguments about the workings of power as being “everywhere” abound; yet ironically, terms such as inequality, hierarchy, racism, sexism, exploitation, and oppression remain noticeably absent from discussions of power. Understandings of power in the broader American context fare little better—because as individuals, we are each deemed to be the sole cause of our own successes or failures, each individual is responsible for fixing any problems he or she may have. This is a long way from Crenshaw’s analysis of the social causes of violence against women and the need for social remedies for such violence. In this context, Dill and Zambrana’s focus on social inequalities constitutes a bold move; it is refreshing yet sobering to return to the important contributions of social science research in pointing out how unjust power relations are organized and operate. They refocus our attention to neglected objects of analysis, namely, the social structural processes by which inequality is organized as well as the mechanisms that can be used to change, address, or transform these structures.

Given this recent history, I think that it is important to return to the initial spirit of scholarly activism/activist scholarship that catalyzed attention to building knowledge and transforming institutions in the first place. In this regard, let me move on to the second core question raised by *Emerging Intersections*, namely, what directions might this field that is still in its infancy now take? This question in turn, raises a series of derivative ones for which there is now no clear answer. For example, is it enough to return to the initial vision that catalyzed the field in the hopes of replicating it under current conditions? Or does such a return constitute a form of myopic nostalgia that is no match for current intellectual and political realities? What have we learned from the many contributions and omissions to the field as it has emerged during its formative years and how might we put this learning to good use today? Is the vision of intersectionality detailed by Dill and Zambrana fundamentally flawed, or merely troubled in its execution?

There are no easy answers to these questions, yet I encourage readers to pay careful attention to Dill and Zambrana’s introductory chapter. There they offer a solid synthesis of some of the best practices of the field and, by doing so, provide a clearer roadmap for intersectional projects than those that were available to either the field at its inception or to former practitioners. Specifically Dill and Zambrana identify four theoretical interventions of advocacy, analysis, theorizing, and pedagogy that they argue are basic components essential to the production of knowledge as well as the pursuit of social justice and equality. They also argue that intersectionality challenges the traditional ways that knowledge has been produced in the United States and illustrates how this theory provides an alternative model that is foundational to this interdisciplinary intellectual enterprise. The ideas from this introductory chapter constitute a solid summary

not simply of the articles included in *Emerging Intersections* but also provide us with a place to start answering some of the thorny questions of today.

This brings me to the third and final core question catalyzed by this volume, namely, how might we continue to move the field forward from here? Dill and Zambrana provide a compelling case for continuing to build alternative explanations for existing phenomena by bringing contemporary disparities into view, analyzing those that were hidden and unknown, and, in other cases, reformulating thinking about the seemingly familiar, e.g., single mothers. In a context of practices such as proclaiming that racism is dead under the banner of colorblind racism, of claiming that women are equal to men because gender-neutral social policies seem to be in force, and the erasure of poverty as a social problem via mass-media amnesia, it becomes even more important to cast the critical analytical lens of intersectionality on prevailing social inequalities. By approaching some of the most significant social science research through intersectional frameworks, *Emerging Intersections* raises a clarion call for the next generation of scholar/activists who inherit the very large task of using it to foster social justice. As long as social inequalities persist, scholar/activists using intersectionality will have plenty of material to keep us busy. This is not glamorous work, but it is important work because people's lives depend on it. For example, can we ever develop a comprehensive, effective set of social practices that would head off the disgrace brought on by Hurricane Katrina without attention to intersecting power relations of race, class, gender, regionalism, age, and disability and the placement of varying social groups within them? If scholar/activists do not take on the big challenge of thinking through and challenging social inequalities such as this, then who will?

Beyond the simple advice that we continue to do competent social science research that is informed by the critical analytical lens of intersectionality (which is by no means easy), we might also ask what criteria might fine-tune emerging work in the field of intersectionality? As I see it, such scholarship would reject the false binary of choosing either the deterministic scientific models of the past (for example, the legions of social science studies that were dedicated to proving women's emotional inferiority to men, African American's propensity to violence, the basic perversion of homosexuals, or the damaged culture of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans), or the poststructuralist correctives of the recent past (creating space for individual expression and creativity via interpretive, narrative traditions). Instead intersectional scholarship would choose to place these social structural and interpretative/narrative approaches to social reality in dialogue with one another. More importantly, scholars engaged in intersectional work would be constantly cognizant of and vigilant about the social and political conditions that house their work—even the so-called best work on racism rings hollow when no

African Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, or other historically oppressed ethno/racial groups are part of the research team. Seemingly inclusionary knowledge produced in exclusionary contexts remains suspect, no matter how well intentioned its practitioners might be. Dill and Zambrana's four theoretical interventions of advocacy, analysis, theorizing, and pedagogy do not come with a set of specific instructions that one can follow in setting up a community center, doing evaluation research for a governmental agency, drafting a proposal for a foundation, or writing a dissertation. Instead the guiding principles that they identify in their introduction and that reappear in varying formats through all of the essays in the volume, encourage the next generation of scholar/activists to use the framework of intersectionality to respond to and hopefully address existing disparities and those that might come.

Despite this vision, continuing to move the field forward requires that the expansive approach to intersectionality engage some thorny questions. For one, can the expansive approach taken to intersectionality that seemingly emerges from and remains central to interdisciplinary endeavors work within traditional disciplines? Is intersectionality inherently oppositional to traditional disciplinary approaches to knowledge production and the social conditions that accompany them? Or can intersectionality be recast solely as a theoretical frame that might reform existing disciplinary paradigms? Under what conditions does this kind of scholarship and praxis flourish, and what conditions foster its demise?

For another, can this version of intersectionality's trajectory, namely, its visibility within the American context, be fruitfully used in other Western societies as well as within non-Western settings? As a Western social theory and set of social practices, intersectionality contains numerous blind spots that make it less applicable to non-Western societies, but only if the specificity of the Western experience continues to stand in for everyone else. One would hate to see intersectionality make the same mistake defining the experiences of a small group of humanity, in this case, oppressed groups within Western societies, as representative of all of humanity, in particular the much larger population that lives in non-Western societies. This need not be the case, but it does require a perpetual energy applied to intersectional work that does not affect scholars and practitioners who simply assume that their way is best. Transnational feminist communities come closest to approximating the radical potential of intersectionality, yet this work is demanding and never-ending. In essence, intersectionality's strength may be its self-reflexivity, but this same self-reflexivity comes with the cost of acting more cautiously, slowly, and, sadly, often ineffectively.

Yet another question concerns the status of the field of intersectionality itself. Will intersectional scholarship become tarred with the brush of being

reduced to theories for the oppressed, or can intersectionality make the leap to emerge as a universal way of building knowledge and transforming institutions? Negotiating this dilemma requires addressing two challenges. On the one hand, because intersectionality was launched in the United States by less powerful social actors, it runs the risk of being recast as a form of special interest politics, especially those versions that persist in continuing to lobby for social justice. In essence, a more robust version of intersectionality, the kind presented here by Dill and Zambrana, can be discredited as being too closely tied to the concerns of African Americans, Latinos, and other disempowered groups. On the other hand, a sanitized, depoliticized version of intersectionality may prevail because it is more in tune with current social and political realities. Unlike the invisibility that plagued the field of intersectionality at its inception, it now faces an entirely new challenge of being hypervisible within equally novel conditions of global, commodity capitalism. In U.S. academic settings, a superficial version of intersectionality is routinely packaged, circulated, and sold to faculty and students alike, only to be prematurely discarded when the product's performance fails to match the promises on the package. In this consumer context of accelerated packages of ideas, intersectionality becomes just another theory vying for attention in the universe of its competitors. In brief, the placement of the field of intersectionality and its practitioners within the very power relations that they study and aim to transform continues to have a far-reaching effect on not only what is practiced, but also what can be imagined.

As we move through the early decades of the twenty-first century, Dill and Zambrana remind us that the growing quiescence about social inequality neither means that disparities have disappeared nor that social hierarchies have atrophied. Moreover, in the current context whereby social justice initiatives have been roundly severed from academic scholarship and where the pressures to keep ideas and politics separate seemingly prevail, it remains difficult to retain the robust, initial vision of social justice that catalyzed intersectionality's origins. Thus, at this particular historical moment, one characterized by deeply entrenched and seemingly growing inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and citizenship-status, the critical analytic lens provided by intersectionality may be more needed than ever.

Reference

- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.