



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality  
and American Pragmatism in Dialogue

Patricia Hill Collins

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Volume 26, Number 2, 2012, pp. 442-457  
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/486319>

# JSP

## Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue

*Patricia Hill Collins*

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, short-sighted, and short-lived advancement for a few. Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom or you are working for the sake of your self-interests and I am working for mine.

—*June Jordan*

June Jordan (1992) had her eye set on an understanding of freedom that challenged social inequality as being neither natural, normal, nor inevitable. Instead, she believed that power relations of racism, class exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism were socially constructed outcomes of human agency and, as such, were amenable to change. For Jordan, the path toward a reenvisioned world where “freedom is indivisible” reflected aspirational political projects of the civil rights and Black Power movements, feminism, the antiwar movement, and the movement for gay and lesbian liberation. These social justice projects required a messy politics of taking the risks that enabled their participants to dream big dreams.

I often wonder what June Jordan would make of conceptions of social inequality, power, and politics within contemporary social theories. Heady terms such as *freedom* that were so central to the emancipatory projects of Jordan's times seem relegated to the dustbin of ideas from the mid-twentieth century. In their place, we encounter understandings of the here and now as curiously "post" or "after" major developments. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and postraciality all suggest that we inhabit a post-social movement era, one that may be "post" the possibility of freedom. Yet, as events of 2011 such as Arab Spring and the various Occupy movements remind us, social movements and the emancipatory politics they espouse can emerge overnight. Thus, this malaise of postemancipatory politics emanating from the academy may be more indicative of the mental state of Western scholars in ivory towers than that of people on the ground.

In this context, how might social theory speak more effectively to contemporary social phenomena in ways that address the realities of social inequalities, power, and politics? Two contemporary fields of study that seemingly eschew the backward-looking "posting" of contemporary social phenomena in favor of a forward-looking approach speak to this question. As knowledge projects, American pragmatism and intersectionality both aim to use their tools of analysis to grapple with contemporary social issues, and, as such, both might have implications for contemporary social theory.

Despite differences of longevity and contemporary intellectual focus, both discourses constitute works in progress that engage themes of social inequality, power, and politics. American pragmatism, a well-established field within American philosophy, is currently seeing a revitalized scholarly interest whereby "old" ideas from the classical pragmatism of the early twentieth century are made "new again." As part of this process of self-reflexive revitalization, themes legitimated within the canon, such as pragmatism's utility for rethinking democracy, increasingly constitute topics of serious investigation. Yet, despite this revitalization, themes of social inequality, power, and politics are not yet central to contemporary investigations, in part because they were not focal points of classical pragmatism. In contrast, social inequality, power, and politics have been primary concerns of intersectionality since its inception. Catalyzed by the social movement politics of the 1960s and 1970s, race/class/gender studies as a knowledge project became visible within U.S. higher education in the 1980s with the arrival of people of color, women, and similarly marginalized groups whose

social power had historically limited their ability to legitimate knowledge. Since the 1990s, the term *intersectionality* has emerged as the umbrella term framing this emerging field of study.

Pragmatism and intersectionality potentially complement each other, in that each discourse speaks to gaps in the other. Pragmatism presents a provocative analysis of community that provides a useful framework for understanding the processes by which social structures are constructed, yet its neglect of power relations limits its own arguments. Intersectionality provides a distinctive analysis of social inequality, power, and politics, yet the relative newness of this field in the academy has produced provisional analyses of these themes. In all, in both discourses, using the pragmatist construct of community and infusing it with intersectionality's ideas about social inequality, power, and politics might animate new avenues of investigation.

### **American Pragmatism: Social Inequality, Power, and Politics**

Approaching a field as broad and significant as American pragmatism by emphasizing its omissions may seem counterintuitive. Yet this process of reading the silences, excavating the subtext, and/or reading between the lines suggests that what seems to be absent is actually present. Much as the margins on this page frame the text at its center, the marginalization of themes such as social inequality, power, and politics within pragmatist discourse has enabled *other* themes to occupy center stage. A voluminous literature exists that engages American pragmatism's core thinkers, themes, definitions, and so on, one too broad to summarize in this essay.<sup>1</sup> Instead, my overall approach here is to examine themes that, despite their relative invisibility, have also shaped the pragmatist canon.

One distinguishing feature of classical American pragmatism is that it seemingly paid scant attention to race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, or nationality. Given the Progressive Era, a period of tremendous social unrest and a period during which classical pragmatism emerged, this omission is surprising. Instead, the themes of classical pragmatism, such as attention to democracy, science, enlightenment, fairness, and societal good, seem distanced from the contentious political debates of the day. Pragmatism's arguments rested on its ability to imagine abstract human beings versus particular female or black ones, abstract communities versus

particular collectivities such as labor unions or families, abstract citizens versus immigrant and nativist ones, and abstract democracy versus the particularities of U.S. democratic politics. Via this expression of universalism, American pragmatism gained legitimacy primarily as a methodology or set of tools that one might use in studying particular social phenomena. As a result, social inequality, power, and politics were defined out of the *center* of American pragmatism. This does not mean that these entities were not present—they simply were not principle concerns. Social inequality, power, and politics are implicit throughout this discourse but are not core theoretical concerns. Pragmatism could uphold social justice projects, and its practitioners, as individuals, often became important figures within progressive causes. In essence, the discourse lacked a self-reflexivity on its own universalistic assumptions whose understandings of social phenomena were affected by its placement in the social inequalities, power relations, and politics of its inception.

Much issue can be taken with my brief and admittedly critical overview of American pragmatism, but for now, I want to explore the implications of American pragmatism for contemporary understandings of social inequality, power, and politics. Because pragmatism has been very useful to me in conceptualizing social inequality, power, and politics, I find it ironic that these ideas have not been more central to the field itself. In essence, neglecting these themes limits pragmatism's analysis of its core concepts, among them, a social self, the utility of experience, the dynamic nature of social organization, and a theory of action that is inherently political. In the remainder of this section, I examine one important idea within pragmatism, namely, the construct of community, as one that is currently neglected within contemporary social theory. Developing a more robust analysis of community points toward pragmatism's potential contribution to understandings of social inequality, power, and politics as well as how making these ideas more central within pragmatism itself might enrich the field.

Several characteristics of the construct of community, taken together, potentially shed light on social inequalities within the contemporary United States and the intersecting power relations that animate them.<sup>2</sup> First, the construct of community provides a template for describing actual power relations as people live them and conceptualize them. The idea of community as well as lived experiences within actual communities are central to how people understand and organize the social inequalities of everyday life. Because people exercise power in their everyday lives as

individuals in multiple and crosscutting communities, it stands to reason that ordinary people will use the construct of community to think and do politics. Via its attention to social groups and communities, pragmatism provides a much-needed midlevel of analysis that is in between the individual and broader social structures.

Incorporating analyses of power into pragmatic conceptions of community promises to enrich understandings of social phenomena overall. Social structures such as neighborhoods, schools, jobs, religious institutions, recreational facilities, and physical and cyberspace marketplaces are the institutional expressions of social inequalities of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and ability. Typically hierarchical, these structures offer unequal opportunities and rewards. Whether intentional or not, people use the construct of community to make sense of and organize all aspects of social structure, including their political responses to their situations. Similarly, social institutions use the symbols and organizational principles of community to organize social inequalities. Communities thus become major vehicles that link individuals to social institutions.

A second dimension of community, directly influenced by the social constructionist bent of pragmatism, concerns the construct's ease of use. Calling attention to discourse analysis well before contemporary concerns, pragmatism introduced the importance of symbolic functions in constructing communities. Community is a symbol that people share in shaping social reality, yet it is a term that is versatile and malleable. These characteristics of versatility and malleability that make community easy to use also make it unexamined, taken for granted, and difficult to define (Cohen 1985). In everyday life and within much academic discourse, the term *community* is used descriptively, with minimal analysis or explanation. As a result, community can be imagined in many ways, from the microlevel of analysis so prominent within social psychology to the macrolevel analysis of nations as imagined communities (Anderson 1983). The versatility and malleability of the construct of community as a symbol also facilitate its effectiveness as a template for power relations. American pragmatism suggests that imaginings of community can be more empirically grounded, drawing upon pragmatic tenets of scientific inquiry that develop definitions by repeatedly reworking them through data. One can imagine community through the simultaneous embrace of the universal of community as a construct that is always understood through an emerging set of particulars that attend to intersecting power relations.

A third significant feature of the construct of community, suggested by pragmatism, concerns the ability of the construct of community to move people to action, often by catalyzing strong, deep feelings. Community is not simply a cognitive construct; it is infused with emotions and value-laden meanings. People may believe and support their political leaders, but their level of emotion and care about their communities is central to their political behavior. Whether an imagined community is a place-based neighborhood, a way of life associated with a group of people, or a shared cultural ethos of an ethnoracial or national group or religious collectivity, people routinely feel the need to celebrate, protect, defend, and replicate their own communities and ignore, disregard, avoid, and upon occasion, destroy those of others. Here pragmatism's emphasis on rationality seems limited, in that people may be convinced by ideas, but they are moved to action often via emotions. Highlighting emotions as central to community behavior and analyzing template-based systems provide a window into the political behavior of groups who strive to uphold inequality as well as those who aim to change it. Pragmatists quite rightly focused on democracy and on processes of participatory democracy to create democratic communities. Yet they aimed to temper emotions with rationality, not seeing how the two worked together.

Fourth, one outcome of this ubiquity, versatility, and ability of the construct of community to move people to action is that people's imagined communities can hold varied and often contradictory meanings that reflect diverse and conflicting social practices. Contradiction need not be irrational. People can share the same cultural symbols yet understand and deploy them differently, a situation that catalyzes varying meanings and practices. For example, contemporary partisan politics reflect, in part, very different understandings of American citizenship and who legitimately belongs and who should remain outsiders. Democratic politics is the language of community writ large. Thus, the malleable meanings of community simultaneously catalyze contradictions and enable those contradictions to coexist.

Community can never be a finished thing (harkening back to the "post" thinking of contemporary social theory) but is always in the making. A more dynamic, future-oriented understanding of community creates space for imagining something different than the present and a worldview that critically analyzes existing social arrangements. In this sense, participating in building a community is simultaneously political, for negotiating differences of power within a group; dynamic, for negotiating practices that

balance individual and collective goals; and aspirational. The challenge, however, of sustaining this dynamic conception of community lies in finding ways to negotiate contradictions. In this regard, the symbolism associated with community is key, with the elasticity of the symbol serving as a measure of its effectiveness. Symbols are often most useful when they are imprecise: the specific content of a given political project is less significant than how the construct of community enables people to imagine new forms of community, even as they retrieve and rework symbols from the past (Cohen 1985).

In the United States, community can be a symbol for egalitarianism, the quest for a place where every individual is recognized as an equal member of the community with entitlements and responsibilities commensurate with his or her ability to serve the greater good. In this sense, ideas about community and participatory democracy remain bundled together—democracy is not a thing that can be achieved but, rather, a relational process honed in the crucible of lived experience across differences in power. The construct of community may be ideally suited for democratic aspirational projects because its effectiveness lies in its ability to wed strong feelings to projects that are designed to advance the greater good. John Dewey, Jane Addams, and Alain Locke, among others, saw this connection between participatory democracy and community, viewing both as never finished but always under construction. These characteristics of the construct of community not only describe the dynamics of actual power relations; they can also serve as a template for aspirational political projects, such as that described by June Jordan.

Because the idea of community is ubiquitous, versatile, multifaceted, and able to marshal emotions that move people to action, it is especially well suited for crafting diverse and often antithetical political projects. Political leaders know that when individuals develop a social self that reflects a sense of belonging to a community, they can be more easily moved to act to defend that community's putative interests. And this social self embedded in community is directly tied to individual experience. The language of community seemingly catalyzes a more robust understanding of *experience* that enables it to be conceptualized as *both* universal (community as a symbolic template) *and* particular (communities as actual social structures). Social justice projects—such as feminism's emphasis on consciousness-raising, which enabled women to see their seeming individuality in relation to the collective status of women, the sensibility of which was expressed



via the slogan “The personal is political”—demonstrate the effectiveness of recognizing the power of community within politics.

### **Intersectionality: Social Inequalities, Power, and Politics**

Intersectionality is a newly recognized field of study within the academy whose purpose has been to analyze social inequality, power, and politics. Because not only understanding but challenging social inequality have also been central to the mission of intersectionality, the interrelationships among social inequality, power, and politics have assumed distinctive forms within this knowledge project. Because, when compared with American pragmatism, intersectionality is quite new, I approach it using a narrative method (rather than the taxonomic approach, used in the previous section, to the construct of community within American pragmatism).

Contemporary narratives concerning the emergence of intersectionality routinely ignore its links to black feminist politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Toni Cade Bambara’s edited volume *The Black Woman* (1970) stands as a groundbreaking volume of work by African American women who were involved in political struggle in the 1950s–1970s. Taking an implicitly intersectional stance toward African American women’s emancipation, African American women from diverse political perspectives presented provocative essays concerning how they would never gain their freedom without attending to race and class and gender. Following Bambara, major works by Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and June Jordan, among others, established the groundwork for what came to be known in the 1980s and 1990s as race/class/gender studies.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1980s, some of the main ideas honed within the context of black women’s activism became crystallized within pamphlets, poetry, essays, edited volumes, art, and other creative venues. In 1982, the Combahee River Collective, a small group of African American women in Boston, issued a position paper titled “A Black Feminist Statement” (see 1995) that laid out a more comprehensive statement of the framework that had permeated black feminist politics and that subsequently came to be known as intersectionality. 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.

Embracing an identity politics that claimed a collective voice for the group, the statement proposed that what had been treated as separate systems of oppression were interconnected. Because racism, patriarchy, class exploitation, and homophobia collectively shaped black women's experiences, black women's liberation required a comprehensive response to multiple systems of oppression. June Jordan's perception of indivisible freedom permeates the statement. Jordan's discussion of freedom 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. Subsequent expressions of black feminist thought contained an explicit analysis of the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems of power that was clearly tied to social justice projects and social movement politics (Collins 2000).

Given the historical derogation of women of African descent, it is tempting to grant African American women a colonial "discovery" of a yet unnamed intersectionality. Yet it is clear that African American women were part of a broader women's movement that incorporated Chicanas and other Latinas, native women, and Asian American women, a constellation of groups that subsequently became redefined as "women of color." Thus, it would be far more accurate to say that women of color were at the forefront of raising claims about the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality in their everyday lived experience and that their intellectual production provides a foundation for race/class/gender studies and intersectionality. For example, Latina feminism also came of age during this same decade of the 1980s, with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, especially her classic volume *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), making an important contribution to framing studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Anzaldúa's work in particular sets the stage for examining important contemporary themes such as border space, boundaries, and relationality that have subsequently become so prominent within contemporary intersectionality.

The transitional decade of the 1980s witnessed a shift in the social location of race/class/gender knowledge projects from social movements to the academy, a shift that helped codify the discourse. Women of color arguing for the interconnections of race/class/gender and sexuality not only produced documents within social movement politics; this same decade saw the incorporation of some of these very same women into U.S. higher education. It is important to remember that had social movements not fought

for the inclusion of women and people of color inside the academy, ideas about race/class/gender are unlikely to have gained acceptance. Thus, the inseparability of race and class and gender that was drawn from the intellectual production of women of color was increasingly codified in the academy in the 1980s within race/class/gender studies. By this expansion into the academy, the more fluid structural and symbolic boundaries of intersectionality as a knowledge project that were associated with social movement politics morphed into fields of study that fought for space and legitimation within academic politics. Once this change of terrain occurred, the strategies and arguments associated with race, class, gender, and sexuality shifted.

The term *intersectionality* emerged in this border space between social movement and academic politics as a term that seemed to best capture the fluidity of this emerging, influential, yet amorphous knowledge project. Ironically, narratives of the emergence of intersectionality rarely include this period of social movement politics and instead confine themselves to locating a point or origin within prevailing academic politics. It's as if the ideas associated with race, class, and gender did not exist until they were recognized by academic institutional actors, primarily by giving the emerging field of race/class/gender studies a legitimate name.

Prevailing narratives of the emergence of intersectionality routinely claim that Kimberlé Crenshaw "coined" the term *intersectionality* in a much cited 1991 article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." Crenshaw's article marks a juncture when the ideas of social movement politics became named and subsequently incorporated into the academy. Her work also serves as a touchstone for evaluating thematic emphases in intersectional scholarship in the academy: for example, the acceptance of the term *intersectionality* and ideas about marginality that had been so central to its development and the increasing criticism and derogation of identity politics that had been so central to launching the field itself. Crenshaw's work is quite valuable for its ability to remind us of how the sensibilities of social movement politics and their commitment to social justice initiatives influenced, and became subsequently shaped by, sophisticated theoretical perspectives, in particular the growing significance of postmodern and poststructuralist analyses within the late twentieth-century American academy.<sup>4</sup>

Since the early 1990s, intersectional scholarship, broadly defined, has gained acceptance in many fields of study in the academy. Issues of

social inequality, power, and politics did not disappear, yet they received different emphases as intersectionality became legitimated in the academy. It appears that an initially holistic knowledge project became changed during its migration into the academy, with an increasing distinction made between intersectionality as a paradigm for studying complex social inequalities and intersectionality as a political project for bringing about social justice: intersectionality as a framework for understanding power relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and others, on the one hand, and intersectionality as a framework that might catalyze social justice projects, especially those that might empower oppressed groups, on the other hand.

Within the academy, by far the lion's share of attention has gone to using the insights of intersectionality to develop an analysis of complex social inequalities. Here I briefly summarize four themes that operate not only as topics of investigation in the literature but also as framing assumptions for intersectional scholarship.<sup>5</sup> This is a provisional and debatable list of the distinguishing features of intersectional scholarship, yet it does identify some of the themes that currently preoccupy scholars who claim intersectionality as part of their intellectual projects. These themes are not all present in a given work, nor is each theme unique to intersectionality. Rather, the varying combinations of these themes can be seen as distinguishing features of a range of intersectional knowledge projects, all of which are positioned in some direct relation to these themes. Each of these themes provides a provocative glimpse into how intersectionality's initial holistic approach to social inequalities, power, and politics continues to shift as it becomes increasingly incorporated within and legitimated by prevailing academic norms. More important, each of these themes presents a potential point of dialogue where intersectionality might be informed by the ideas of pragmatism, specifically its potentially expansive understanding of community.

### **Intersectionality and Pragmatism in Dialogue**

One theme within intersectional scholarship concerns how intersecting power relations of race/class/gender/sexuality shape individual and group-based social locations. This insight has catalyzed considerable attention to questions of individual and group identities. The trajectory of intersectionality has been characterized by increasing attention to individual identities

and less focus on group or collective identities. In essence, the robust understandings of identity politics honed within social movements have been increasingly challenged within contemporary social theory. Individual identities and the personal politics that accompany them seem acceptable. In contrast, collective identities are less so.

Here American pragmatism's well-developed history of the social self, experience, and the significance of symbols all affecting the construct of community provides a set of tools that potentially might counteract this drift toward decontextualized, individualized identities. Pragmatism's analysis of the social self developed in the context of community provides a provocative argument concerning experience that scholars of intersectionality might find especially useful. Conversely, intersectionality's analysis of complex social inequalities might stimulate pragmatist analyses of communities as infused with power and politics. Stated differently, linking conceptions of identity politics honed within social movements with pragmatism's complex analyses of community discussed above might catalyze an especially fruitful dialogue.

Second, intersectional knowledge projects acknowledge that the distinctive social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations have important epistemological implications. Intersectional scholarship suggests that all knowledge, including its own, cannot be separated from the power relations in which it participates and which shape it. Because intersectional scholarship originated in a stance of critique, its practitioners often initiate intersectional projects by examining patterns of bias, exclusion, and distortion within recognized fields of study. All knowledge is constructed within and helps to construct intersecting power relations; notably, this includes the construct of intersectionality itself. Pragmatism, too, recognizes the situated nature of knowledge in the social, yet its approach to the social underemphasizes the significance of social inequality, politics, and power in what counts as knowledge, including its own.

Despite the absence of overt analyses of power, pragmatism's approach to the social construction of community, with community being conceptualized as a symbolic structure of ideas as well as an actual set of social practices, resembles the epistemological approaches within intersectionality. For example, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002, 316) discuss the situated imagination as a crucial component of feminist standpoint theory, pointing to the ways in which social positioning shapes knowledge as well as

the imagination. This approach yields two unique insights: (1) individuals and groups are differently positioned in a distinctive matrix of domination, which has implications for how we experience society, including *what we know and can imagine*, and the material realities that accompany this experience; (2) individuals and groups can *simultaneously* experience privilege and disadvantage (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). I read Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis's analysis of the situated imagination as providing a provocative point of convergence between pragmatic concerns with the social self and the construction of knowledge and intersectionality's emphasis on power.

A third core idea that characterizes intersectional scholarship is attention to relationality and relational processes. This emphasis on relationality highlights the ways in which race, gender, class, and other systems of power are constituted and maintained through relational processes. The analytic importance of relationality in intersectional scholarship demonstrates how various social positions (occupied by actors, systems, and political/economic structural arrangements) necessarily acquire meaning and power (or a lack there of) in relationship to other social positions. This highlights the intersecting and co-constructing nature of social systems and structures organized around power and inequality. Here, despite the absence of a focus on power, pragmatism provides a robust analysis of relational processes—the construct of community is inherently about relationships across differences. Intersectionality and pragmatism also seem to be in alignment in that both emphasize ideas about relational difference versus oppositional difference. Both fields emphasize the relationship among agents in constructing communities, not the static differences that distinguish individuals from one another.

A fourth and related core idea of intersectional knowledge projects concerns the nature of the connections among the knowledges and social structures of communities. Not only are actual social relations relational (e.g., actual communities), but the worldviews they catalyze (e.g., interpretive communities and standards attached to discourses such as pragmatism and intersectionality themselves) are necessarily relational as well. Intersectionality's ability to draw attention to and account for *inter*-social locations—including those on the margins—challenges binary thinking, shifting the analytic focus on the fluidity among, interrelationships between, and co-production of various categories and systems of power. As a result, epistemologically, intersectionality highlights the various standpoints that

“inter” social locations occupy; these alternative standpoints challenge truth claims advanced by historically powerful social actors.

When placed in dialogue pragmatism and intersectionality both contribute to a potentially more comprehensive understanding of social inequality, power, and politics. Intersectionality contributes the important insight that social inequalities are multiple, complex, and mutually constructing. It sees the theme of complex social inequalities as central to its mission, which draws on a specific, useful, and constantly emerging analysis of complex social inequalities. Because race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, nationality, and religion constitute major axes of power in early twenty-first-century global politics, they catalyze multiple forms of social inequality. For intersectionality, pragmatism provides a ready-made set of conceptual tools for advancing arguments about social inequalities. Conversely, intersectionality’s more robust analysis of social inequality might push the pragmatist canon further along paths that it is already traveling. All of the major constructs of the pragmatist canon might be strengthened by a sustained engagement with intersectionality’s emphasis on power.

Within intersectionality, the emphasis on the social location, multiplicity, and relationality of social locations and worldviews also has enabled the field to develop a deeper understanding of power. In essence, systems of power (such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status, etc.) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; instead, systems of power intersect and co-produce one another to result in unequal material realities, the distinctive social experiences that characterize them, and intersecting belief systems that construct and legitimate these social arrangements. Stated differently, racism, sexism, class exploitation, and similar oppressions mutually construct one another, drawing upon similar practices, forms of organization, and ideologies. Pragmatism might benefit from investigating how power operates within communities of pragmatist scholars as well as the knowledges they produce. Placing understandings of power more centrally within pragmatist discourse potentially catalyzes new readings of “old” themes, the case suggested here with my cursory review of the construct of community.

To me, developing dialogues about social inequalities and power constitute fruitful directions for intrafield discourse as well as cross-field communications. Yet both discourses can remain static unless animated by a focus on politics. Intersectionality has much to say about politics, but what are the contemporary politics of intersectionality itself? What are

the contemporary politics of pragmatism itself? Pragmatism has said far less about the kind of social justice politics envisioned by June Jordan, yet its focus on ideas of participatory democracy grounded in building communities might provide especially provocative and fruitful avenues of investigation.

Overall, it seems that pragmatism, briefly discussed here via the construct of community, potentially provides a much-needed set of conceptual tools for deepening intersectionality's holistic analysis of social inequalities, power, and politics. Conversely, intersectionality's analyses of social inequalities, power, and politics provide a provocative catalyst for pragmatism to revisit its core tenets.

#### NOTES

1. Stuhr's view of American pragmatism is especially useful in encapsulating the boundaries of this field: "It may be defined by its exponents' common attitudes, purposes, philosophical problems, procedures, terminology, and beliefs. It is in virtue of such a shared complex of features that we identify, understand, and differentiate philosophical developments, movements, and 'schools of thought.' Such a unity of character, we must recognize, is not a single and simple essence, some necessary and sufficient feature of classical American philosophy, some property present always and only in classical American philosophy. Instead, it is an identifiable configuration, a characteristic shape, a resemblance, an overlapping and interweaving of features (present to differing degrees in the writings of the individual philosophers) that, as a relational whole, pervades and constitutes this philosophy and these philosophers" (2000, 2–3).

2. For a comprehensive analysis of the construct of community, especially connections with complex social inequalities and systems of power, see Collins 2010.

3. Several anthologies exist that illustrate the breadth of black women's intellectual production and its connections to race/class/gender studies (see, e.g., Guy-Sheftall 1995).

4. For a close reading of Crenshaw's 1991 article, see Collins 2011.

5. For a comprehensive analysis of these ideas, including extensive citations, see Collins and Chepp forthcoming.

#### WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press.



- Bambara, Toni Cade. 1970. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: Signet.
- Cohen, Anthony P. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2010. "The New Politics of Community." *American Sociological Review* 75:7–30.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2011. "Piecing Together a Genealogical Puzzle: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 3, no. 2, <http://www.journalofpragmatism.eu>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Valerie Chepp. Forthcoming. "Intersectionality." In *Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, ed. L. Weldon. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Combahee River Collective. 1995. "A Black Feminist Statement." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. B. Guy-Sheftall, 232–40. New York: New Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43:1241–99.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, ed. 1995. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: New Press.
- Jordan, June. 1992. *Technical Difficulties: African-American Notes on the State of the Union*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Stoetzler, Marcel, and Nira Yuval-Davis. 2002. "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge, and the Situated Imagination." *Feminist Theory* 3:315–33.
- Stuhr, John J. 2000. "Introduction: Classical American Philosophy." In *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. J. J. Stuhr, 1–9. New York: Oxford University Press.