

Gender & Society

<http://gas.sagepub.com/>

Looking Back, Moving Ahead: Scholarship in Service to Social Justice

Patricia Hill Collins

Gender & Society 2012 26: 14

DOI: 10.1177/0891243211434766

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gas.sagepub.com/content/26/1/14>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Sociologists for Women in Society

Additional services and information for *Gender & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gas.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gas.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 23, 2012

[What is This?](#)

LOOKING BACK, MOVING AHEAD: Scholarship in Service to Social Justice

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS
University of Maryland, College Park

Patricia Hill Collins reflects upon her past, present, and future scholarship.

Keywords: Community; Race; Class; Gender; Race/Ethnicity

Many people know of me primarily as a professor of sociology who teaches classes, writes books, and serves on endless faculty committees. Others view me as an accomplished scholar of Black feminism whose interdisciplinary work inspires their own. Still others have met me during my over twenty years of service to the American Sociological Association. I suspect that many other points of view on who I am exist—a role model to junior colleagues whose work has followed in the footsteps of my work on Black feminism and intersectionality; a puzzle to my progressive white colleagues who wonder why I'm not as outspoken as they; a straw woman to my Black colleagues who question my Blackness; an African American woman whose intellect scares some people if I say what's really on my mind; or an anonymous, ordinary Black woman who can't get a good table in an upscale restaurant if she leaves her business suit, attaché case or expensive jewelry at home.

I am all of these things some of the time, but none of these things all of the time. The fluid nature of how others view me as well as how I see them has shaped the content and process of my intellectual production. My work encapsulates multiple situated standpoints—distinctive, competing, and often contradictory angles of vision that shift not only when I vary physical and intellectual social locations but also when times change around

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Patricia Hill Collins, University of Maryland, OH, USA; e-mail: collinph@umd.edu.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 26 No. 1, February 2012 14-22

DOI: 10.1177/0891243211434766

© 2012 by The Author(s)

me. While it has been tempting to simplify my situated standpoints and merge them into a homogeneous narrative to make the world more comfortable for me, my challenge has been to sustain a commitment to dialogical knowledge production, especially in situations of conflict. Stated differently, I consistently seek out connections among entities that seem disparate, resisting the temptation to prematurely synthesize things into a tidy story, yet also recognizing that a story needs to be told.

We can throw up our hands at the magnitude of the task of negotiating the complexities of our individual, situated standpoints, or we can embrace a form of engaged scholarship that is grounded in a commitment to dialogical knowledge production. C. Wright Mills's rich concept of the sociological imagination that places individual biography, history, and society in dialogue becomes useful to ground dialogical knowledge production. Here I use this construct as an organizing principle to revisit selected aspects of my life's work. I examine two significant social locations that nurtured my intellectual work, namely, (1) my six-year engagement with the community schools movement in Boston, Massachusetts, and (2) my 23-year career as a professor in an African American Studies department. In both places, I was neither blindly trying to change society nor dispassionately studying it. Rather, I was actively engaged in trying to foster social justice, using the power of ideas as my weapon of choice.

ST. JOSEPH'S COMMUNITY SCHOOL AND ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

When I arrived in 1970 to work as a middle school teacher, curriculum developer and community organizer, St. Joseph's School was undergoing a transformation from a traditional parochial school to a community school grounded in principles of participatory democracy. Operating both as a K-8 community school and as a demonstration project of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education (HGSE), St. Joseph's aimed to forge new relationships with the working-class and poor African American residents of its surrounding neighborhood. Its students were homogeneous, but its staff certainly was not. The school community included a heterogeneous group of teachers, parents, nuns, lay teachers, neighborhood volunteers, and HGSE doctoral students and faculty. If you wanted diversity, we had it. We faced the challenge of building a community across differences of race, class, gender, age, region, education, religion, and ethnicity that would enable us to achieve excellence (sexuality was still in

the closet, but there nonetheless). Building a community across such difference was an uphill battle. We agreed on practically nothing except the need to do everything we could to teach, nurture, and empower the African American and/or poor children in our care.

We each brought our specific talents to the project of crafting the kind of critical pedagogy that would develop a different kind of student. In my case, I mined my education both for relevant content on people of African descent and for skills of critical thinking and imagination that might encourage our students to envision their education in far more expansive terms than memorizing factoids for standardized tests. We did not want to teach them merely to fit into the system, although, for reasons of survival, knowing how to fit in without selling out is essential. They also needed to know how to analyze, critique, and change the systems of inequality that disempowered them. I saw my intellectual production as tethered to this broader goal, one that I now see as intellectual activism, or doing engaged scholarship that fosters some broader ethical goal.

I quickly realized that the critical thinking component of my formal education was first-rate, whereas the content had tremendous holes. Thus, my engaged scholarship focused on in-depth research in search of substantive ideas, whether they were written with my students in mind or not. Responding to the historical and social context of the Black Power movement, I read everything I could on everything related to race and Black people, domestic and global. I was astounded at how much I found that, to this day, still remains neglected within dominant curricular offerings. I had to teach myself before I could teach others, thus practicing the skill of creating new frameworks versus endlessly criticizing those advanced by others. Others in my cohort (who by then were in graduate school preparing to be professors) were reading *The Wretched of the Earth* in their graduate seminars and debating with each other. In contrast, I was rereading this book in the context of community politics, trying to figure out how to translate what was useful for my seventh- and eighth-grade students, their parents, and members of the St. Joseph's community. Because elite academics were not my intended audience, I neither published anything that I wrote nor saw my intellectual work as tethered to my own career trajectory. Unfettered by a scripted curriculum, or undisciplined by an established field of study, the intellectual freedom of this period enabled me to experience ideas and actions as iterative.

Although this was not the language that we used at the time, I can see how the idea of social justice constituted a core principle that enabled us

to negotiate the differences build community in order to. Our separate paths to St. Joseph's drew on several social justice traditions. Drawing on the ethical frameworks of Catholicism, the nuns shared how poor people throughout the globe used liberation theology to challenge their subordination. The Harvard contingent was influenced by traditions of participatory democracy inspired by the works of John Dewey, as well as works on adult literacy and empowerment by Myles Horton at the Highlander Center and Paulo Freire in Brazil, these ideas to St. Joseph's social justice project. The parents, volunteers, and other folks from the neighborhood who were involved in the school brought a social justice ethos from social movement politics and popular culture. Influenced by the social justice visions of figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Last Poets, and Nina Simone, they drew inspiration from the commitment of these figures to remedy longstanding injustices rendered by racism and class exploitation. I also brought my own personal social justice perspective to St. Joseph's, one developed during my undergraduate years at Brandeis University. My undergraduate sociology major's grounding in continental philosophy, especially critical theory as advanced by the Frankfurt School, taught me much about the significance of engaged scholarship for social justice. Moreover, the work of exiled Jewish intellectuals whose commitment to ensuring that the atrocities of the Holocaust would never be repeated (encapsulated in the phrase "never again") influenced my understanding of social justice.

What fascinates me is how this foundational experience at St. Joseph's community school has shaped the thematic approaches and theoretical perspectives of my scholarship and career. I never intended to be a college professor, yet the high bar that I set for myself in preparing lesson plans for middle school students in a context of engaging multiple social justice traditions has shaped the kind of scholar and professor that I have become. St. Joseph's enabled me to explore the connections among critical pedagogy, engaged scholarship, and the politics of knowledge production, delaying for a decade the deadening "publish or perish" ethos of higher education. Instead, it put me on a different path of being a rigorous scholar and a public intellectual with an eye toward social justice traditions. Whether from the elite of HGSE, or my spirited middle school students, or a broader community of working-class, African American citizens thirsty for sophisticated yet accessible analyses of inequality, I learned that social justice projects require the dialogical processes of engaged scholarship in order to thrive.

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AND *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT*

A few years back, a high school teacher in inner-city Baltimore sent me a link to a YouTube clip featuring one of his debate team participants. He thought that I would be interested in knowing how a young, African American girl used my material on Black feminist epistemology to frame her arguments. After viewing her video, I was impressed. Seeing this young debater wield the ideas of Black feminism made my struggle to get *Black Feminist Thought* published worthwhile. Her intellectual activism helped validate my 23 years as a professor in the African American (AFAM) Studies Department at the University of Cincinnati.

In the 1980s and 1990s, African American Studies was a difficult space to inhabit, primarily because universities devalued these units. Black Studies remained chronically underfunded and largely disrespected. Despite the challenges of being a professor within a Black Studies unit with no graduate program, I chose to stay. I saw my time in AFAM Studies as an extension of the kind of engaged scholarship for social justice that characterized the community schools movement. Quite simply, AFAM Studies had African American students, and the majority of those students were women. Moreover, at the University of Cincinnati, the vast majority of my students were working-class, many the first in their family to attend college. Fostering social justice required finding a way to speak *to* them and not just *about* them.

Intellectual freedom is a wonderful thing, but you have to fight for it. Grappling with the demands of multiple interpretative communities while remaining grounded in the everyday concerns of my students was simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. Spending time within Women's Studies units to discuss (Black) male sexism with white women colleagues and students seemed limited. I felt hemmed in by the default question that repeatedly emerged within Women's Studies: "How can Black and white women get along?" Instead, I chose an equally if not more difficult path of talking to Black men and women about patriarchy in African American communities. Years later, in *From Black Power to Hip Hop* (2006), I was able to analyze these two different ways of doing Black feminism, weighing the costs and benefits of each. To this day, I find it far easier to challenge white women on issues of race than Black men on questions of gender and sexuality.

I am convinced that my subsequent work on intersectionality, especially its focus on analyzing how race, class, gender, nation, age, ethnicity,

and sexuality mutually construct one another as unjust systems of power, was enhanced by the challenges of making intersectional arguments about Black feminism intelligible within Black Studies settings. In my assessment, *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics* both resonate with diverse audiences because they were honed in this space of intersectionality marked by consensus and conflict. Building on the foundation provided St. Joseph's dialogical knowledge project, I had to envision multiple interpretive communities for my scholarship. Who would read my work? My students? The general public? Academics? Everybody? Or nobody?

My social location in Black Studies shaped the process of writing *Black Feminist Thought* because the critical pedagogy required for my undergraduate teaching fostered intellectual freedom for me and for my students. For example, I used the course "Contemporary Black Women" as a vehicle for a dialogical knowledge project on Black feminism. I taught this course several times, each time revising material and subsequently using my syllabus as a table of contents for the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*. Yet when it came to African American women and their perceptions of Black feminism, I faced an uphill battle because my students flatly rejected the term "feminism." In their minds, feminism was for white women, not them. I simply taught the course, avoiding the use of the term "feminism." Imagine their surprise at the end of the course when I told them that our course was an extended exploration of the main ideas of Black feminism. They loved the material when they didn't know it was called Black feminism. I concluded the course with the question "Who benefits from your rejection of the term 'feminism'? Who benefits when you claim Black feminism and its main ideas?"

The critical pedagogy that I used in "Contemporary Black Women" also helped me sharpen my understanding of the significance of standpoint epistemology. This class pushed me to see how my earlier understanding of situated standpoints as an individual concern was too narrow—situated standpoints were also collectively constructed angles of vision on the world. The revelation came in class one day when, for unknown reasons, the white students skipped class, thereby creating a class of all-African American women. We were scheduled to discuss an article on Black love relationships by a prominent sociologist. My students had no interest in delving into the reading—they wanted to know about the author. Was he Black? Did he have a white girlfriend? Was he married? Somehow the rules of the class had changed. I was frustrated by their seeming lack of analytical engagement with his arguments until I realized that they were using an

alternative epistemology, one grounded in knowing who produced knowledge and how that person's social location might shape his or her angle of vision. Specifically, they rejected our classroom norms of uncritically accepting the so-called objective scholar whose "God's eye" on the world enabled him to possess truth. They refused to read knowledge projects outside of power relations, reminding me of the iterative nature of knowledge and the power relations that produce it for people seeking social justice.

Black Feminist Thought was my first book project from this period and thus has special meaning to me. Yet *Fighting Words* (1998), *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), and *From Black Power to Hip Hop* (2006) all illustrate how dialogical knowledge production has enriched my scholarship. Written after my move to the University of Maryland sociology department, *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media and Democratic Possibilities* (2009) carries the critical pedagogy of Black Studies classrooms into a public sociology venue of public lectures. I see this project as a continuation of my trajectory of developing habits of engaged scholarship for my St. Joseph's middle school students, or using critical pedagogy to craft *Black Feminist Thought*. The book builds on the foundation of dialogical knowledge, in the process of its production and in its accessible format as well as in the content of its arguments. As part of a Simmons College lecture series, I delivered four lectures to social justice educators and concerned citizens. The book's content demonstrates how complex ideas can be translated for and developed in dialogue with a heterogeneous audience. Specifically, reminiscent of drawing from the multiple social justice traditions at St. Joseph's School, I drew from the multiple social theory traditions that I taught in my graduate seminars at the University of Maryland, and developed a domains of power framework about racism and antiracism suitable for a public audience.

THE VIEW FROM NOW

I no longer work in community schools, nor am I a professor of African American Studies, yet these two social locations catalyzed an understanding of engaged scholarship and critical pedagogy that still informs my work. Over time, I have gained greater clarity on the two core questions that anchor my scholarship: *What accounts for social injustice? What can we do to foster social justice?* Two of my current projects address these framing questions in ways that are intellectually deeply intertwined, yet are quite different stylistically.

The first, titled *Public Conversations* is forthcoming as a book of essays from Temple University Press. It examines many of the ideas in this essay, namely, constructs such as the sociological imagination, situated standpoints, engaged scholarship, standpoint epistemology, intellectual activism, and intellectual freedom, as well as specific areas of specialization such as Black feminism, intersectionality, and critical pedagogy. Because the book collects previously unpublished essays from the corpus of my work, it provides a mapping of key ideas that permeate my scholarship in relation to varying social justice projects that have unfolded over time. Because speeches constitute the bulk of the volume, the ideas presented in *Public Conversations*' essays are rigorous yet accessible. By presenting ideas that were developed in conversations or dialogues with audiences large and small, the book provides examples of engaged scholarship that is dedicated to dual forms of truth-telling, namely, speaking the truth to power and speaking the truth to people. *Public Conversations* provides a way for me to document the products of varying dialogical knowledge projects.

The second project, tentatively titled *Intersectionality*, interrogates intersectionality as a knowledge project that shifts shapes within specific material, social, and intellectual contexts. I am especially concerned with intersectionality's status as engaged scholarship in relation to contemporary social justice projects.

Three core themes permeate the *Intersectionality* project. First, *Intersectionality* traces the recent manifestation of intersectionality as a construct associated with Black feminism. As a "traveling theory," intersectionality is being used across disciplinary borders and in different national contexts, as well as across boundaries that separate scholarly knowledge from the everyday knowledge of social activists. What happens when an idea like intersectionality travels across multiple social locations? For example, what are the effects on an idea developed within a specific social context, in this case intersectionality developed within social movement politics, that travels into other settings with very different power relations?

Second, the *Intersectionality* project examines the epistemological debates concerning intersectionality within higher education. One of the major problems facing scholars and activists working with this concept lies with its definition. Many approach intersectionality as if it is *already* defined and thus ignore the points of convergence and contradiction that characterize scholarship that claims to be informed by intersectionality. But what exactly is intersectionality? Because intersectionality constitutes

the term currently applied to a diverse set of practices, interpretations, methodologies, and political orientations, we cannot assume that we are studying a fixed body of knowledge, methodological framework, or theoretical orientation. Is intersectionality a concept? Is it a paradigm, a heuristic device? Or is it a theory? Intersectionality may be one, some, all or none of the above. The volume does not aim to solve these debates, but rather to generate a cognitive map of some of the major issues.

A final theme of the *Intersectionality* project concerns the future prospects for intersectionality in scholarship, research, and social action. Here the project looks outward at actual social conditions, especially my interest in placing engaged scholarship in service to contemporary social justice projects. In what ways, if any, is intersectionality a useful concept in explaining current patterns of social injustice and in pointing the way forward toward social justice? Is intersectionality destined to be an ever-more-elegant social theory that explains oppression? Or, in the spirit of St. Joseph's community school, can we use it to foster social justice? Time will tell.

Patricia Hill Collins is Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and Charles Phelps Taft Emeritus Professor of Sociology within the Department of African American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. She has published many award-winning books, and was the 100th President of the American Sociological Association.