Everybody is talking about intersectionality these days. Whether one is out of the loop and wondering what all the fuss is about or in the inner circle and trying to decide whether and how to use it most effectively as a tool, either of the two books reviewed here—Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons, by Anna Carastathis, and Intersectionality, by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge—will prove an invaluable guide.

Before considering the arguments the authors advance for why the approach they take is particularly useful, it may help to step back and consider what NON-intersectional sociology looked like. In the 1980s, Elaine Hall and I surveyed all the most widely used textbooks in introductory sociology; and, among other things, we found that race, class, and gender didn’t, and in some ways couldn’t, intersect to inform a basic sociological understanding of inequality. These books captured the prevailing wisdom of their time: class was a macro-structural arrangement organizing societies; race was a group membership defining cultural identities, institutionalized barriers, and political mobilization; and gender was a biosocial characteristic cultivated through childhood socialization and maintained by deep-seated “traditional” attitudes (Ferree and Hall 1996). Operating at different levels of social organization, gender, class, and race were understood then as social processes independent of each other and ranked by the priority given them in the “classics” of social theory: class was definitely structurally significant, but race and gender were “identities” and “epiphenomenal.”

Since then, this consensus has largely been replaced, not without struggle, by a commitment to understanding these processes as all working at all three levels, as being far from independent, and as being about exacting privilege as well as penalties from social arrangements. As an academic approach (which is not all that intersectionality should be, Hill and Bilge argue), intersectionality offers an agenda for theorizing inequalities as contingent, connected, and conflictual. The main questions for sociologists and others trying to grapple with the politics of race, gender, and class have therefore changed dramatically, and the frontiers where theory meets empirical research in the twenty-first century are new. Rather than race, class, and gender, the new concerns are about racism, (hetero)sexism, nationalism, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, populism, and imperialism, as well as the old standby, capitalism.

The intersectionality with which these authors are concerned is both a political and an intellectual project. Both books approach intersectionality less as a list of group memberships to be combined analytically than as an ongoing struggle to overcome naturalized categories that seem to hold fixed social positions. Naturalization and essentialism, not particular privileged or powerful groups, are treated as the enemies of agency and transformation. The authors’ agenda is therefore quite consistent...
with the desire to integrate micro and macro, structure and agency that sociological theories express in many forms, while also continuing to challenge the marginalization of gender politics and feminist theorizing across many of the disciplines and interdisciplinary projects concerned with understanding and contesting social inequality. Since neither of these books assumes that intersectionality is merely a more interesting way of saying “race, class, and gender,” they are positioning themselves at the frontier where the premise of intersections among inequalities points to a plethora of new theoretical, methodological, and political questions.

The popularity of the term “intersectionality” can obscure the diversity of meanings it can carry. Quite a multitude of articles across the social sciences and beyond have been attempting to clarify the resultant theoretical mess, and the result looks something like an interdisciplinary “field” of research and theory—“intersectionality studies.” Some of the most cited articles are those that offer a mapping of that field. As yet, no single map has proved authoritative; but if one is to be adopted as a guide, either of these books, despite their important differences, would be a good candidate for that role.

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s book, Intersectionality, is from the Key Concepts series from Polity, joining the publisher’s other concept books on topics like work, childhood, democracy, poverty, and justice. Collins’s concept of a “matrix of domination,” advanced in her classic Black Feminist Thought (1990), is typically cited as one of the originating ideas advancing intersectional theorizing, and this volume follows her 2013 article with Valerie Chepp in the Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics as a contribution to mapping where the field as a whole has developed in the decades since then. To a great extent the book is organized to follow key controversies over the strengths and limits of intersectional analysis, and Collins and Bilge stake out clear positions even while emphasizing how many questions remain.

Most centrally, the book argues explicitly that intersectionality is not just a form of inquiry and critical analysis but necessarily also a form of praxis that challenges inequalities and opens a collective space for both recognizing common threads across complex experiences of injustice and responding to them politically. In this telling, academics’ embrace of intersectional theorizing is a potentially treacherous claim to ownership of a practice that operates as much or more at the grassroots and is a product of the work of activists of both the global South and North.

Anna Carastathis is a considerably more junior philosopher whose Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons offers a map centered on women and feminist studies and tries to assess the ground that has been covered and the directions where new questions beckon for academic thinkers with political goals. Making her view an interesting counterpoint to Collins and Bilge’s, her central point of reference is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s formulation of intersectionality, and her analysis provides a historical view of the field primarily as an academic one. She offers very fair-minded and thorough accounts of the critics of intersectionality (particularly from the left and from feminists) and of the different ways that the concept can and should continue to “improve” from the currently excessively categorical and positivist views that make it popular but problematic.

By embracing intersectionality first and foremost as an exercise in academic theorizing, albeit of a very interdisciplinary type, Carastathis sets her agenda apart from that of Collins and Bilge. But her detailed textual analyses share a concern with politics, as they are used to point to the limitations of what this theory can do to foster a goal of liberation. Better theory is what Carastathis wants, and that implies for her a more fundamental critique of naturalized and essentialized groups and a “profoundly destabilizing, productively disorienting, provisional concept that disaggregates false unities, undermines false universalisms, and unsettles false entitlements” (p. 237).

Both books devote much of their attention to the limitations of intersectionality as currently understood. For Collins and Bilge, the danger lies in the appropriation by the academy of intersectionality as a bit of theoretical jargon that abstracts away from the concerns and political communities that the term was originally framed to address.
Carastathis, too, is worried that “paradoxically, the success of intersectionality may mark its failure, the wide travel of the concept its shallow apprehension” (p. 3). Her focus is directly on the new(ish) field of gender, women’s, and sexuality (GWS) studies rather than on sociology and other social science disciplines. In other words, the books become apologists for a particular view of what intersectionality is and how it should be used, while also being critical of those whom they see as appropriating it and diluting its meaning. Collins and Bilge focus on what they see as an excess of academic theorizing that is divorced from any agenda of social transformation, while Carastathis assumes GWS studies have a transformational politics in mind but sees feminist researchers as too possessive and triumphalist about a concept that she argues still is only “provisional” (p. 11).

Both books view positivist versions of intersectionality as some kind of combination of categories to be misleading, but for different reasons. For Collins and Bilge the mistake is separating knowledge from grassroots knowers and making it a critical theory without a critical praxis. Their methodological concerns focus on participatory action research and other ways of breaking down the hierarchy between scientists and subjects. The understanding intersectional analysis gives to those who think about crosscutting and complex identities and issues is meant to be tied to an intersectional praxis. As they argue, “The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. . . . Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves” (p. 2). Intersectionality is thus framed as a simple, accessible, and reality-affirming form of knowing open to anyone, which has been constructed democratically by movements and political activists from hip-hop artists to cyberfeminists, as well as by academics.

Collins and Bilge therefore are quite critical about treating intersectionality as the intellectual property of academics or as grand theory that requires years of study to grasp. They take a shot at the academic writers who recurrently credit Kimberlé Crenshaw with “coining” the term, seeing this as implicitly conferring intellectual property rights on her. The “intersectionality studies” approach commodifies the concept as a versatile new product for academic theorists but blunts the edges of an approach meant to be empowering to people experiencing injustices in their lives that are multidimensional in origin. They want to move intersectional analysis away from being a concept or an intellectual “thing” to being a process that combines critical inquiry into inequalities and critical praxis to advance social justice.

By contrast, Carastathis takes Crenshaw as her foundational case and focuses her analysis on the elements of Crenshaw’s writings that she believes have been misconstrued or misappropriated. Her close textual reading stresses how the arguments are meaningful in relation to the political and legal fields that Crenshaw was most concerned to change. Carastathis also deplores the commodification of academic knowledge and its circulation in a debased and deracinated form, and her vision of intersectionality builds on an agenda of inclusive transformation that becomes fully articulated in her last two chapters as she draws in the critical perspectives of transnational, anticolonial feminist theorists.

Despite their different orientations, the two books are surprisingly similar in many of their features, including the conviction that intersectionality cannot remain theoretically tied to American ideas about race and U.S. racial politics but needs to continue its development toward better understanding postcolonial geopolitics and neoliberal marketization. Both challenge the triumphalist embrace of intersectionality as a redemptive moment for white feminism and posit a continuing struggle to actually achieve either inclusivity or equality. Both books also raise the salience of sexuality as politics and the theoretical assumptions of heteronormativity that framing race, gender, and class as “the” trinity of intersectionality obscures. Both draw a connection between the recognition of intersectional processes and the practical struggle against social injustice, without implying that they are identical. Albeit for different reasons, both place empirical social science in the service of
of improving theory rather than seeing theory as a guide for research practice. Both also are comprehensive, forward-looking, and fundamentally fair guides to the past, present, and future of intersectionality.

The differences in how they map this field are most marked in matters of style and case selection. Collins and Bilge begin with case studies of social practice that echo their definitional claim that intersectionality is a praxis, not merely a theory, and that it is not an invention of academics of the global North but a response to actual experiences of complex forms of injustice. They argue that “popular understandings of intersectionality underemphasize the practices that make intersectional knowledge possible, especially the practices that come from criticizing, rejecting, and/or trying to fix the problems that come with complex social inequalities” (p. 32). Intersectional practices, they argue, combine attention to “inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice” in various empowering ways, and intersectional inquiry ought to be a way of contributing to and learning from this real complexity. “Intersectionality is not simply a method for doing research but is also a tool for empowering people,” they assert (p. 37).

This commitment to a critical praxis informs their rejection of dogmatism both within and against intersectional theorizing. Those who see “identity politics” as depoliticizing are challenged to see identities as more collective, achieved solidarities rather than as manifestations of some essential membership in a naturalized group; and those who embrace intersectionality as an achievement of feminist theory are directed to the complexities of critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial theory as equally important sources. They discuss Crenshaw’s work not by textual analysis but by situating it in her continuing activism: in Crenshaw’s engagement in criticizing legal understandings of discrimination and violence; in her participation in global organizing for the Durban UN Conference (on Race, Racism, Xenophobia, and Nationalisms), which provided an impetus and medium for the circulation of the concept with which Crenshaw is credited; and in Crenshaw’s more recent challenges to policy centered on black men that erases black women’s experiences (#SayHerName). As Collins and Bilge note, Crenshaw herself does not claim any “intellectual property” in the term, and they credit her with a continued intersectional praxis of seeking justice that is overlooked in the usual narrative. Social movements are what make the idea of inequalities as intersectional actually useful and circulate it; academic use divorced from such struggles converts it into a hollow and contested “accomplishment” rather than a tool.

The examples Collins and Bilge offer throughout their book take aim at separations of critical analysis from the praxis of advancing social justice. They offer a compelling example in the separation of academic departments doing critical studies of inequality from the praxis of contesting intersectional injustice on campus, where “diversity” has been redefined as a property of people of color and is addressed by institutionalized service in administrative roles. The global dispersal of intersectional analysis is reframed not as a matter of academic citation but as work carried out in the struggles against silencing waged in social media and in the global spread of hip-hop as “spoken-word” art that articulates resistance to contextually specific experiences of oppression. And critiques of intersectionality as being focused on particular identities, creating a “politics of victimization,” and weakening class struggle by directing attention to “cultural matters” come in for stinging rebuke in terms of solidarity (“building a collective we”) and power relations (that set white men in the global North at the center, even in critiques of oppression from the left, and assume white women in the global North have a special claim to theorize feminism). They prefer process terms like racism, sexism, and capitalism to categorical formulations like race, gender, and class but use their examples to bring in other processes of inequality like nationalism, securitization, ageism, and heteronormativity that rely on each other to exist and spread. As they see it, intersectionality theory is essential because resistance to oppression must be prepared to name and challenge these connections to be effective.

Carastathis offers the kind of searching academic detail about the theories that is
less well represented in Collins and Bilge’s well-informed, deeply felt, and elegantly written manifesto. Being deliberately more narrowly focused on the issues intersectionality raises for feminist scholars, she can support a critical view of the debates about the limitations of identity theory, the appropriation of intersectionality as intellectual property, and the diversity of uses to which it is put. She builds on Crenshaw’s own work to argue that intersectional analysis is too often superficial, triumphalist, and essentializing, failing to make the jump from merely combining positivist understandings of group identities to destabilizing their grounding in “nature” and critiquing the power relations that are instead at their root. She makes an effort also to separate Crenshaw’s idea of plural sources of inequalities (the metaphor of intersections) from the specific social locations of injustice (the metaphor of the basement) that deny some people visibility and voice.

Like Collins and Bilge, Carastathis rejects the idea that intersectionality “belongs” to feminism (rather than the reverse) and wants to “queer” the narrative by emphasizing the destabilizing of normative certainties about identity. Her primary goal is to offer “analytic clarity, intellectual rigor, and a politicized, historicized understanding” of intersectional claims about inequality’s “complexity, simultaneity, irreducibility, and inclusivity” (p. 9). She elaborates on Crenshaw in developing a perspective on every identity as inherently a coalition in which individuals struggle to make some sense of the multiplicity of their experiences of injustice (a view Collins and Bilge share) but emphasizes the subordination and invisibility produced for some identities. Carastathis explicitly condemns the “institutionalized forms” of intersectionality that position it as an advanced and post-racist form of feminism that “can function as an alibi for, and even an impediment to, coalitional praxis” (p. 187), especially in regard to transnational and indigenous feminisms. With its detailed summaries of critiques and counter-critiques, her book would be an ideal guide for graduate students who may have been (mis)taught to use the term as a synonym for any combination of multiple positions, for black women’s identity politics, for feminist inclusivity, for multi-issue social movements, or simply to signify a nonracist politics of gender, class, sexuality, age, or disability.

Carastathis does a good job of highlighting the valid points in each of these anti-intersectionality arguments before ultimately building a case for claiming the more complex meaning of intersectionality as systematic erasure of the possibility of being the complex person you are when you appear before the law or in the hands of a positivist social analyst. Thus the identity work of reclaiming “from the basement” that which was made invisible by the operations of institutions like law, formal electoral systems, interest group politics, and academic theory has to be part of the understanding of intersectionality. Complexity and relationality alone are insufficient criteria to understand identity politics as being intersectional; the struggle over visibility and voice in structures of erasure and silencing are also defining characteristics, in her view. Taking up the point that intersectional feminism needs to break the silences endemic in the epistemology of the global North and de-solidify the borders that make intersectionality about “negative differences,” Carastathis concludes with an argument for “threshold theories” full of contradictions and disorientations. In her view, “real” intersectionality can never become the kind of politics of recognition or representation that would fit comfortably in institutionalized knowledge systems or give us political identities that we could embrace without ambivalence.

In the end, I believe the differences between the books are stylistic and rhetorical rather than fundamental. Collins and Bilge speak with the authority of experience in the political trenches; Carastathis reacts to a scholarly literature with detailed citation and offers political ideals. Collins and Bilge subordinate their criticisms of political practices and theoretical interpretations to their effort to develop a positive program uniting critical inquiry and praxis on an equal basis. Like good teachers, Collins and Bilge are critical but encouraging, while Carastathis enjoys the take-down sport of philosophy from a stance that is theoretically radical but divorced from actual praxis. Either book will offer a strong counter to any belief
that intersectionality is a simplistic slogan, a synonym for race and class and gender, or a better form of feminism. Intersectionality is a frontier for sociologists to explore. Either of these guides will lead readers to unsettling new ideas and challenges to what one might think one already knows.

References

A Comparative Approach to Social Differences
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Rogers Brubaker is well known in the sociology of race and ethnicity for the critique of “groupist” tendencies in his now-classic Ethnicity without Groups. In Grounds for Difference, Brubaker extends his comparative and constructionist lens beyond ethnicity; he argues that in recent decades sociological theories of social difference have been challenged by the return to scholarly and popular prominence of three age-old social forces: inequality, biology, and religion. A word of warning—Grounds for Difference does not even attempt to integrate its separate efforts at synthesizing the three literatures on social stratification, social studies of science, and nationalism. However, Brubaker’s underlying position is clear: the idea of nation, especially the normative expectation of local homogeneity amid global plurality, pervades and motivates our understandings of social difference.

The introduction is where Brubaker connects or at least juxtaposes his discussions of inequality, genomics, and religion. A word of warning—Grounds for Difference does not even attempt to integrate its separate efforts at synthesizing the three literatures on social stratification, social studies of science, and nationalism. However, Brubaker’s underlying position is clear: the idea of nation, especially the normative expectation of local homogeneity amid global plurality, pervades and motivates our understandings of social difference.

Brubaker opens his discussion of inequality by sketching a hypothetical difference-blind world where “who is what [is] independent of who gets what” (p. 11) in order to pose his core question of how inequality and difference are linked. His answer is to revisit Charles Tilly’s (1998) decidedly non-groupist theory of how organizations import external categories and match them to internal positions, that is, “discontinuous bundles of rewards and opportunities” (p. 55), and to then expand his answer in the direction of groupist accounts of inequality. Critiquing Tilly’s theory as both marginalizing and homogenizing different kinds of differences, Brubaker compares how citizenship, gender, and ethnicity are associated with inequality. In place of Tilly’s processes of exploitation and opportunity hoarding, he proposes three general processes supplemented with a fourth factor: the categorically unequal distribution of honor. This new framework allows him to claim that (1)