

# Oppression and Injustice

*A Class Textbook*



# CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>Unit 1 – How Does Oppression Work?</b>	4
What are the different domains in which oppression is enforced? <i>This chapter introduces feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the “four domains of power” as a starting point for conceptualizing and categorizing power in its varied forms.</i>	
Are we all oppressed? If so, what are the ways? <i>This chapter explores concepts of power as domination, intersectionality, and dehumanisation to explain how an oppressive society hurts all of us, even if we are not all oppressed.</i>	9
Are there universal links between oppressions in different cultures/geographic regions? <i>This chapter explores the question of whether a universal social movement is possible, with a focus on feminism; and comes to a conclusion that while there are certain universal links that can transcend geographical boundaries, a universal feminist movement is not possible.</i>	13
How can I know if I'm oppressed? <i>This chapter shows that the lack of mutual recognition between the different communities of a given society is a striking sign of oppression as it leads to the under-representation of a particular group and to the production of a distorted discourse regarding this group.</i>	18
What is epistemic injustice? <i>This chapter explains the concept of epistemic injustice and the alternative, Black feminist epistemology.</i>	22

<b>Unit 2 – What Is Oppression?</b>	26
What is sexism?	
<i>This chapter explores how sexism manifests as a form of oppression and how other systems of oppressions intersect with sexism.</i>	
What is ableism?	31
<i>This chapter provides an introduction to ableism as a dimension of oppression and discusses about the main arguments made in disability studies in order to show how ableism oppresses people with disabilities of differing identities.</i>	
What is Queerphobia?	38
<i>This chapter introduces the concepts of queerphobia and queerness, explaining the different dimensions that the oppression and discrimination of queer people can occur, and how these oppressions are complicated by intersectionality.</i>	
What is racism?	46
<i>This chapter explores how and why racism can be understood as a system of domination, showing how it manifests and is preserved by different domains of power and finally how it affects the oppressed.</i>	
What is economic oppression?	51
<i>This chapter examines the economic dimension of oppression under the capitalist system and how economic oppression is related to racism and bourgeois activism.</i>	
<b>Unit 3 – How Do We Resist Oppression?</b>	54
What is the role of epistemology in resisting injustice?	
<i>This chapter focuses on how individuals can analyze their existing notions about different forms of knowledge and actively seek out other epistemological standpoints, in order to work toward a more inclusive epistemology that resists injustice.</i>	

How do we resist oppression as the oppressed group? <i>This chapter discusses how oppressed groups can resist oppression by applying the concepts of 1) the dialogical model of education, 2) vanguardism, and 3) obediential power.</i>	60
How do we resist oppression as the oppressor group? <i>This chapter suggests ways in which oppressors can resist oppression by 1) unpacking the concept of “oppressor”, showing how almost everyone at some point in their lives has been in a relatively oppressing or oppressed position, because of their position within the matrix of domination; and 2) raising three concepts where both oppressors and the oppressed groups can better understand ways to resist oppression: critical self-inquiry, kaleidoscopic consciousness, and allyship building.</i>	66
Should we work within or outside the system? <i>This chapter tackles the action-oriented question of where one is best placed to make change, through asking the question of whether Reformism or Radicalism is the preferred mode of change-making.</i>	71
How can we form coalitions across different oppressed groups? <i>This chapter explores the different strategies and mindsets oppressed groups can cultivate in order to work together in a coalition against a common oppressive force.</i>	75
<b>Unit 4 – A World Free of Oppression</b> <i>This unit presents each author’s unique personal vision of what a world free of oppression would look like.</i>	81
<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	86
<b>References</b>	98
<b>List of Student Contributors</b>	101

# FOREWORD

When I explain to others that my students have been writing a class textbook for the 2018 YHU2280 “Oppression and Injustice” course, a common and immediate reaction is to ask: how can *students* who are learning the material be expected simultaneously to *teach* it? Indeed, this is clearly the central challenge of the project. But it is has also been a central tenet – not only of my own pedagogical practice, but of the overarching ethos at Yale-NUS College and in the work of thinkers you shall read in the following pages – that students are not passive recipients or consumers of knowledge. They are active subjects with the power to *produce* knowledge and put it to use in the world. Moreover, I designed the course to focus on texts in two traditions of thought, Black feminism and Latin American philosophy, all but one of which I had never been assigned in any courses I ever took myself. Thus the lines between “teacher” and “student” were even more blurred than usual (though students may be interested to know that undergraduate instructors quite commonly teach on materials encountered for the first time, so that lines are blurred more often than they think!). What drew us all together was a set of academic, personal, and political commitments that made it important to try and understand the problem of overcoming injustice through seriously examining the theorizing of oppressed groups themselves – and anyone who has ever stepped foot on the long and convoluted road to justice learns as soon as they are out the door that we are all of us student-teachers and teacher-students at different points along the way.

We are grateful for the funding provided by the Yale-NUS Teaching Innovation Grant scheme, which enabled the printing of this book. In my initial grant application, I identified a number of further challenges embodied by the project: “the challenge of theorizing about liberation in a jargon-free way that is not inaccessible to the people whose liberation is in question, the challenge of reconciling alternative epistemologies with a dominant epistemology that in academia often serves a gatekeeping function against certain types of knowledge, and the challenge of organizing themselves to work toward a shared long-term goal when each comes to the table with a different set of background

experiences and perspectives.” I am thus delighted that, as the following pages will attest, the class has risen splendidly to the challenge. They have extensively discussed the tone, style, and accessibility of writing they aimed for, debated the purpose and value of scholarly conventions such as citation formats, and critically reflected on the disconnect between their positions in the academy and others outside it.

Perhaps most difficult of all (as I know from some of the emotions felt and expressed throughout the process), even more so than the high-level ideas they encountered in unfamiliar and occasionally abstruse texts, they managed to perform largely on their own initiative a very large task involving a very large number of people. A task as simple to state as it was complicated to coordinate, plan, and execute – a task which, in these ways, resembles the much larger “real-world” task of overcoming injustice. Indeed, I submit that the class *has* in reality made an authentic contribution to that larger task, by writing a textbook that amplifies the reach of diverse and historically underrepresented voices to get to actual readers like you. For that they should be very proud of themselves, as I am of them, just as I am confident that these students will ably carry on the fight against injustice far beyond our classroom walls.

—Robin Zheng, Assistant Professor of Philosophy (Humanities, Yale-NUS College)

# INTRODUCTION

This book is a product of a Yale-NUS College course called “*Oppression and Injustice*”, taught by Assistant Professor Robin Zheng. Through the lenses of 17 students, it seeks to dissect issues regarding oppression and injustice in an accessible and thematic manner, with a general audience in mind.

Importantly, although this class project originates from within the academy, its epistemic commitment lies in representing the perspectives from the standpoint of the oppressed. Drawing mainly from the field of Black feminism and studies in Latin America revolution, the first half of this book explores different features of oppression and the methods through which such oppression work. The second half of this book is devoted to examining ways of resisting oppression and envisaging how an alternative world – one that is free of oppression – would look like.

Ultimately, this book does not aim to provide a one-size-fits-all diagnosis of the current state of oppression nor does it proffer a recipe one could follow to obtain a utopian world. However, it is the authors’ hope that, through diverse perspectives from prominent historical movements and voices, the reader will find useful theoretical and practical tools to supplement her own in her struggles against oppression, whatever form that oppression might take. The purpose then is not to have a book documenting a hermetic picture of what oppression looks like and how to face it, but to suggest different frameworks that would help begin constructive engagements with issues regarding oppression and injustice.

# Unit 1: How does oppression work?



## What are the different domains in which oppression is enforced?

What is oppression? What distinguishes it from, say, discrimination? While it is sometimes difficult to definitively separate the two, we can generally understand oppression as discriminatory, cruel or unjust treatment against individuals or a group, *built on a pre-existing power imbalance*. That is, oppression is not only discriminatory, but it is also systematic and or institutional.

Oppression is amorphous and manifests in varied forms. It is impossible to produce an exhaustive list of actions and institutions that perpetuate oppression, so it would be more helpful instead to draw from feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins for her idea of the four *domains of power*.

Collins writes in her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, that power can be conceptualized one of two ways: as possessed by a monolithic “oppressor” group and exerted upon an “oppressed” group, OR as shared in different degrees and forms by all different identity groups. In the former, power is exerted only top down, while in the latter, power circulates throughout all of society and is used for both oppression as well as resistance. The concept of “domains of power” is useful because it encompasses both meanings, thus making it one of the more productive ways to discuss power. Rather than categorize actions by their producer (oppressor or oppressed), or whether they are used for “resistance” or “oppression”, the domains instead categorize action by the *role* they play in power dynamics.

According to Collins, the structural domain “organizes oppression”, the disciplinary domain “manages it”, the hegemonic domain “justifies it” and the interpersonal domain “influences everyday lived experiences

and the individual consciousness that ensues”<sup>1</sup>. The domains are explicated as follows:

## **Structural**

Actions in the structural domain “organize oppression” through large scale, interlocking and longstanding social institutions. These are the “macro” sites of power, and we could think of realms as diverse as the legal system, labour markets, schools and the media. Under the legal system, we could take the example of xenophobic or nationalistic policies that deny immigrants or other marginalized identities full citizenship rights. We could also think of domestic social policies that privilege one group over another when it comes to accessing critical spheres of life such as education or the job market.

Social scientists have long noted institutions’ resistance to change. Collins notes that because of their sheer inertia, borne of their large scale, system-wide and interconnected nature, manifestations of structural power are some of the most tedious to address, and require more **revolutionary** rather than **reformist** movements to overhaul.

## **Disciplinary**

Even after gaining access to exclusionary social institutions (made exclusionary thanks to structural oppression), marginalized identities may still encounter oppression in the disciplinary domain. Actions in this domain “manage power relations” through “bureaucratic hierarchies and techniques of surveillance”<sup>2</sup>. That is, the way organisations are structured (their promotional policies etc.) as well as the way that employees are watched, create a sense of discipline among the marginalized identities to further control them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 276.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

We could take “maid cameras” as an example of surveillance techniques par excellence. These are closed circuit television cameras bought by employers for the exclusive purpose of monitoring their domestic helpers in the home. If known about by the employees, these cameras produce a fear of – and submission to – the employer’s omnipresent gaze, further subjugating employees in an unequal power dynamic.

## **Hegemonic**

The hegemonic domain of power shapes “ideology, culture and consciousness”<sup>3</sup>: essentially the prevailing body of ideas a community takes to be “commonsense” knowledge. This body of knowledge then justifies an oppressor group’s right to wield disproportionate amounts of power.

Examples of actions within the hegemonic domain of power abound. They vary in maliciousness and deviance from established, empirical fact, but all share the same goal of manipulating public consciousness. These include historical revisionism in school textbooks, media misrepresentation and scientific racism.

The most insidious feature of mechanisms in the hegemonic domain is their ability to make themselves self-evident; “naturalizing” a body of ideas such that they seem axiomatic, timeless, and immutable. Conversely, however, resistance mechanisms in the hegemonic domain of power work to “denaturalize” these commonsense ideas that perpetuate subjugation. This can be done through positive media portrayals, such as the growing trend of strong feminist female leads in Hollywood movies.

## **Interpersonal**

As we move from the structural to the interpersonal, we find a concurrent shift from “macro” to “micro” techniques and mechanisms of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 284.

oppression. Unlike the structural or disciplinary, actions in the interpersonal domain may be understood as “smaller scale” or quotidian. That is, these techniques “function through routinized, day to day practices of how people treat one another”<sup>4</sup>. In some sense, they are the most insidious, for they are the easiest to dismiss as merely insignificant incidents divorced from the broader power structures they engender and are engendered by. Examples of interpersonal actions include microaggressions, the casual degradation of a marginalized group either intentionally or unintentionally through snubs, slights, and insults.

It is worth noting that domains are interrelated: that is, actions in one domain can possibly either amplify or dampen the effects of actions in another. For example, we could look at the interplay between the hegemonic and interpersonal domain: the more purportedly “commonsense” a body of ideas, the possible increase in discriminatory interpersonal interactions.

The above are only some examples of oppressive actions and mechanisms. We can use Collins’ concept of domains of power to understand, and respond to, instances of exerting power in our own lives.

*Key Terms:*

**Reform vs revolution:** reformistic tactics and movements are those that make only incremental change, or benefit the most privileged in an existing system to the exclusion or detriment of the most marginalized. Conversely, revolutionary movements aim to overhaul entire social systems and produce radically different outcomes. For example, gender-inclusive hiring practices in top companies may be reformist for they benefit only upper-class women (i.e. those that have climbed the career ladder to earn the highest salaries.) These practices, however, endorse capitalistic structures which exploit poor and working class women. A truly revolutionary tactic, some would argue, necessitates abandoning capitalism altogether in favour of socialism or communism.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 287.

# Are we all oppressed? In what ways?

While often asked with no ill-intention, this question is often used to derail conversations about oppression. After all, if we are all oppressed, why should we care particularly about others' oppression, or even the widespread oppression of some social groups?

In response, I put forth that we are not all oppressed at the moment, but we all hold the *potential* to be oppressed as long as power in our society is dominating instead of constructive – in other words, used to push others down rather than lift others up. This idea originates from bell hooks, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. hooks theorised that the understanding of power that our society instills into us from childhood is of **power as domination**, in which dominating and controlling others is *the* basic expression of power<sup>5</sup>. hooks argues that seeking power *within* our social systems will still be dominating<sup>6</sup>. For example, women who seek economic success in society as a form of empowerment without using that to help working-class people with that power continue to contribute to the oppression of working-class people<sup>7</sup>. As long as we allow power to be used to dominate in our society, it will always create groups that are marginalised, controlled, and oppressed by other groups. Though many of us are accorded privileges under the current system, that system may shift and in turn, marginalise us.

To be clear, hooks does not think that all power is dominating. Instead, hooks proposes that we need to understand power differently, to see **power as creative and life-affirming** instead<sup>8</sup>. In this conceptualisation of power, power is not expressed as control over others, but as the ability to act, as strength and capability to uplift oneself and others.

---

<sup>5</sup> hooks, 87.

<sup>6</sup> hooks, 86.

<sup>7</sup> More about specific forms of oppression can be found in Unit 2.

<sup>8</sup> hooks, 85.

Thus, unless we seek to radically change our fundamental understanding of power to one that is creative and life-affirming, that seeks to create positive structures with no oppressive dimensions, any attempt at gaining power within the system is likely to shift where power lies but still perpetuate a system that creates marginalised groups. Because of this, while not everyone necessarily experiences oppression, we all share the potential to suffer from oppression as long as we do not question our society's destructive conceptualisation of power as dominating.

Building on this idea, to be “oppressed” can mean very different things depending on how your identities and privileges interlock, and interact with each other and the context you are in. Oppression is not the same for everyone due to our different identities, and even within those identities, oppression can look very different. To help us understand this concept, let us look at the example of women to understand how women's experiences of oppression can be different due to a variety of factors even though women can be categorised into the same social group. Firstly, context – for instance, the racial oppression faced by Chinese women in America is very different from the oppression Chinese women face in Singapore, given the different racial dynamics in each nation. The American racial hierarchy places Chinese below White, whereas Singapore is a Chinese-majority nation, meaning that it is likely to be less oppressive to Chinese people. Secondly, other components of our identities affect us at the same time – for instance, a lesbian woman experiences oppression along the lines of gender *and* sexuality. Thirdly, putting those two ideas together, our identities come into play differently in different contexts. This can be positive or negative. Sometimes one may be in a context in which one identity prevents the oppression one might otherwise experience. For example, if a trans woman grows up in a wealthy and well-educated household in which family members have greater access to information about trans issues and queer theory, their socioeconomic status might shield her, to an extent, from broader societal transphobia.

Thus, to understand oppression, we need to understand the **intersectionality** of oppression. Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw as a lens to interpret how various forms of

marginalisation – such as but not limited to class, race, sexuality, ability, gender – are not independent of each other, but complexly interwoven, particularly in the case of Black women. It has since become a critically important concept in understanding the unique ways in which individuals experience oppression depending on how their identities overlap, intersect, and interact with each other within specific historical and social contexts. For instance, Black women face oppression based on race and gender, and these two forms of oppression interact in ways that compound each other. Similarly, an Indian gay man in Singapore and a Chinese lesbian woman in Singapore might share similar experiences due to oppression based on sexuality, but their experience of oppression would be different due to how they each experience, or not experience, racial and gendered oppression.

Lastly, to be part of a society in which oppression occurs is to be unfulfilled and suffering, even if we are not necessarily oppressed. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire theorises that such a society creates non-democratic human relationships in which domination and oppression are present, which is dehumanising to both those who are oppressed, and those who are oppressors. The oppressed are dehumanised since they are seen to be less than human by oppressors, and the oppressors are dehumanised by their failure to see the oppressed as humans<sup>9</sup>. A useful example to illustrate this is how patriarchy, which oppresses women, is harmful to men too. Under patriarchy, strict gender roles that restrict people from expressing themselves often prevent men from accessing and expressing their emotions. For Freire, being in relationships that are egalitarian and on equal footing is part of humans' ontological vocation – simply put, it is a key component of what it means to be human<sup>10</sup>. Being in non-democratic relationships is to live inauthentically, to go against what it means to be fully human, which might create anxiety and a lack of fulfillment. Though this does not constitute “oppression” in the systematic way that Chapter 1 outlines, an oppressive society is one in which we all suffer, even if not all of us are oppressed.

---

<sup>9</sup> Freire, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Freire, 44, 56.

In conclusion, I propose that when we ask, “are we all oppressed?” we are asking the wrong question. Instead, I call for us to turn our attention to those who *are* oppressed, to find ways to resist oppression that take into account the multiplicity of our collective experiences, and to continue to reach towards a society in which power is not destructive, but life-affirming.

*Key Terms:*

**Power as dominating:** A conceptualisation of power in which its central purpose and expression is to dominate others for one’s own benefit.

**Power as creative and life-affirming:** A conceptualisation of power in which its central purpose and expression is to uplift others.

**Intersectionality:** The interconnected nature of social categorizations of an individual or group, such as but not limited to ability, race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, which create overlapping, interlinked, and interdependent oppression and privilege.



# Are there universal links between oppressions in different cultures or geographical regions?

Everyone has different experiences and the same goes for oppressed people who experience their oppression in different manners. For instance, the struggles faced by white women in the United States is vastly different from the experiences of women in African countries. Undoubtedly, such differences in their experience of oppression have also caused tension due to their inability to understand each other's lived realities. Even though there exists universal links between different groups of oppressed people that transcend geographical boundaries, a truly universal feminist movement is not possible. Yet there is room for greater unity through coalition building, which will be covered in Unit 3.

## Experiencing oppression differently

Social movements—their objectives and conceptualization of equality—are shaped by the lived realities of oppressed groups. When women from different parts of the world experience different manifestations of oppression, their conceptualization of emancipation will also differ. For example, White feminists<sup>11</sup> and Onitsha feminists<sup>12</sup> conceptualize political and economic freedom differently.

---

<sup>11</sup> In this section, “White feminists” refer to bourgeois White second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Germain Greer. As Nzegwu explains, most White Western feminists of the second-wave had poor knowledge of African social life and overlooked intersectionality within the feminist movement.

<sup>12</sup> Onitsha feminists draw a model of equality that is derived from Igbo tradition. It is radically progressive, politically robust, and rooted in the Onitsha cultural context. This model of equality contends that: one, individuals are not interchangeable; two, equality needs to be reinforced by socio-political structures; and three, feminism is culture dependent. Some distinct qualities of Onitsha feminism include: one, biological differences are not grounds for inequality; two, both men and women's needs are equally important; and three, is inherently inclusionary (adapted from: Nzewgwu, Nkiru Uwechia, “The Conclave: A Dialogic Search for Equality,” in *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, 157- 97. Ithaca: SUNY Press, 2006.)

Regarding political freedom, White feminists such as Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir argue that women must be accorded the same political roles as men in order to be considered politically equal<sup>13</sup>. For Onitsha women, however, women attain political power when they are part of major political institutions and have a say at the decision-making level<sup>14</sup>. In other words, women's political freedom is not contingent on being given access to same roles within political institutions. As they argue, men's role in the political arena cannot be considered the most significant<sup>15</sup>.

In terms of economic freedom, Greer and de Beauvoir contend the following: one, women must be accorded same labor functions as men in order to be economically liberated<sup>16</sup>; and two, they should not be relegated to stereotypical non-earning roles like mothers and caretakers<sup>17</sup>. They cite the example of Onitsha women being relegated to domestic roles and not being allowed to plant yams as a form of economic exclusion<sup>18</sup>. This is refuted by Onitsha feminists who contend that women do not have to take on the same labor functions as they have power in their own labor and domestic functions. For instance, Onitsha women control trade functions and establish dominance in the domestic household<sup>19</sup>. They are social complements of men in an interdependent complex<sup>20</sup>—men are in charge of some labor roles while women are in charge of others.

### **Tension and a lack of understanding**

Even though feminists from all over the world are fighting for equality, there are still inherent differences between how they understand freedom

---

<sup>13</sup> Nzewgwu, Nkiru Uwechia, "The Conclave: A Dialogic Search for Equality," in *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Ithaca: SUNY Press, 2006), 183-4.

<sup>14</sup> Nzewgwu, "The Conclave: A Dialogic Search for Equality," 182.

<sup>15</sup> Nzewgwu, 181.

<sup>16</sup> Nzewgwu, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Nzewgwu, 189.

<sup>18</sup> Nzewgwu, 189.

<sup>19</sup> Nzewgwu, 192.

<sup>20</sup> Nzewgwu, 186.

and equality. As Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu argues, the source of tension comes mainly from White feminists' lack of understanding as well as refusal to understand the cultural complexities of women of color.

Feminist literature on Africa since the 1980s has progressively presented African women as subjugated and oppressed beings<sup>21</sup>. **Women of color or third world women** are thus perceived as having few rights within their families and society, leading to the conclusion that they are all nonpersons[1]<sup>22</sup>. When White feminists hear radically progressive and politically robust accounts of the experiences of third world women, they invalidate those experiences by arguing that the latter has **internalized their oppression**. For example, on the topic of sexual and marital equality, White feminists insist that Onitsha women are not sexually free as husbands have inviolable and exclusive rights of sexual access to their wives<sup>23</sup>. They mete out such accusations even after Onitsha women convince them that they have the right to resist sexual advances from their husbands<sup>24</sup>. The ignorance and refusal to understand third world women and their lived realities result in tension between these two groups of women.

### **Transnational links: Black women in the US and Africa**

Given the above discussion which illustrates the difficulty of having a universal feminist movement, there are some feminist scholars who point out universal links between oppressions faced by women all over the world. This is expounded on by Patricia Hill Collins in relation to US and third world women. Collins discusses the similarity of **controlling images** of black women in the US and Africa while Davis explains the similarities in political and economic oppressions of women in the US and Egypt. According to Collins, African women are perceived

---

<sup>21</sup> Nzegwu, 157.

<sup>22</sup> Nzegwu, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Nzegwu, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Nzegwu, 165.

as passive receivers of handouts who are breeding too many children<sup>25</sup>. There is a US parallel, the “welfare queens” or poor African-American women relying on government aid<sup>26</sup>. African-American women were deemed unworthy recipients of aid while African women were deemed unresponsive to aid due to the permanency of their poverty<sup>27</sup>. As Collins concludes, “the best action [for both] was to let them starve.”<sup>28</sup>

### **The (im)possibility of a universal feminist movement**

Given the aforementioned differences between the needs and concerns of different groups of women, a universal movement is not plausible. It is difficult for a universal feminist movement to account for the myriad of experiences of women. The experiences of White women differ from that of women of color, third world women, trans-women, homeless women, disabled women, and the list goes on. Having said that, there certainly exist some similarities in the oppressions faced by women on an international scale; for instance, Black women in the US and African women.

The crux of the issue lies in recognizing and understanding that all women experience oppression differently. It is through recognizing, accepting, and understanding such similarities and differences that different groups of women can rally together to become more cohesive and unified. In doing so, we adopt a difference-recognizing model of equality that will help to account for the different lived experiences of women all over the world. While a universal movement is not possible, there is room for coalition building across different oppressed group.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hill Collins, Patricia, “US Black Feminism in Transnational Context,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 241.

<sup>26</sup> Hill Collins, “US Black Feminism in Transnational Context,” 241.

<sup>27</sup> Hill Collins, 241.

<sup>28</sup> Hill Collins, 241.

*Key Terms:*

**Women of color:** At face value, this term refers to female persons of color. The political term “women of color” refers to a group of female persons of color that called for greater focus on the diverse experiences of non-White women. It surfaced in the violence against women movement in the late seventies with the goal of unifying women experiencing multiple layers of marginalization including gender, race, and ethnicity.

**Third world women:** This term refers to women from developing or less developed region including but not limited to certain areas in Africa, Asia, and South America. Feminism often fail to take into account the concerns of third world women that include under-development and imperialism. White or Western (or first world) feminists often look upon third world women as subjugated beings that need “saving” without taking the effort to learn what forms of assistance is required. First world feminists impose their model of equality without consider under cultural specificities or problems of women in the third world.

**Internalized oppression:** This term refers to the process by which oppressed people come to accept and internalize certain beliefs and stereotypes about their own group. They might also begin to act out such stereotypes which might further harm those in the group.

**Controlling images:** This is a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins which refers to images of subordinate groups developed by dominant groups. Such images are controlling in that they objectify and enforce stereotypes of subordinate groups which justifies their continued inferiority.

# How can I know if I am oppressed?

On Saturday 15th of April 2018, Beyoncé made history by becoming the first Black woman to headline Coachella, one of the world's most popular music festivals. During her performance, the Afro-American singer celebrated Black womanhood and payed tribute to Black culture. In so doing, not only did Beyoncé challenge the mainstream representation of blackness, but she also provided a striking instance of resistance to Black women's oppression. It cannot be denied that such a performance would not have been possible if Black women had not become of their oppression. In other words, an oppressed group cannot overcome oppression if it ignores it is oppressed. Consequently, in order to fight oppression the oppressed group has to recognize its existence and to acknowledge they have internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is a complex psychological process. Simply put, it refers to the gradual acceptance of oppression by the oppressed. In such a situation, oppression switches from the realm of injustice to the one of normality. In other words, the oppressed group stops seeing its own oppression as unfair. This section discusses the different ways in which an oppressed group can become aware of its oppression. I argue that there is oppression when there is no mutual recognition between the different communities of a given society. My arguments will be based on concepts and remarks supported by feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins and José Medina. I will firstly explain why the under-representation of a particular group is a striking sign of oppression. Then I will show that Medina's concept of meta-lucidity is worth considering when it comes to figuring out if one is oppressed.

## **Under-representation and lack of recognition**

In order to know if you are oppressed, you have to figure out whether or not the community you belong to is fairly represented throughout the different structures of society. For instance, if a multi-ethnic country is composed of 60% of an ethnic group A and 40% of an ethnic group B, and the former monopolizes all the top job positions, then you may assume the latter is suffering from oppression. Two comments can be raised from this statement. Firstly, this example is not exclusively applicable to ethnic minorities. Different identity criteria such as genre,

religion, socio-economic background or sexual orientation are also relevant. Secondly, it should be stressed that this segregation is not exclusive to the business world, as it may occur in other fields such as academic, arts, sport, politics, and others.

Regarding the issue of segregation in the academic field, Collins argues that Black women are aware of their oppression as they know they don't have the power to produce official knowledge. In Collins' view, Black women's experiences and knowledge are not only ignored, but also distorted by "elite White men"<sup>29</sup> as they "control Western structures of knowledge validation"<sup>30</sup>. In other words, Collins states Black women's knowledge remains subjugated because Black women have no power over the knowledge validation process. Indeed, Collins points out the fact that Black woman's knowledge is less likely to be accepted due to the fact they cannot "acquire positions of authority in institutions that legitimate knowledge"<sup>31</sup>. As a result, Black women cannot self-defined themselves as their knowledge is not accepted by the dominant group and they kept out of academia. Being aware of this hierarchy of knowledge allows Black women to be aware of their oppression and push them to create an alternative knowledge that relies on different standards in order to challenge widely accepted discourses, and to break down stereotypes generated by the dominant group.

### **Being meta-lucid**

Another way to know if you are oppressed is to be aware of the gap between how you see myself and how others see you. This idea is best captured by Medina's concept of meta-lucidity. According to her, being meta-lucid means being aware of the "limitations of our epistemic

---

<sup>29</sup> Hill Collins, Patricia, "US Black Feminism in Transnational Context," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York:Routledge, 2000) p. 251

<sup>30</sup> *Idem.*,

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 254

lives”<sup>32</sup>, that is to say being aware of the limitations of one’s standpoint. For instance, Black women scholars are meta-lucid as they know their knowledge is limited because they lack the experiences and knowledge of other groups. In that sense, the limit to their knowledge is internal. To Medina, Meta-lucidity is the result of an “epistemic friction”. This expression refers to “the interaction of heterogeneous standpoints”<sup>33</sup>, that is to say the clash between two conflicting perspectives namely how a subject sees oneself and how it is ignored and/or distorted by the others. In the case of Black feminism, epistemic friction refers to the divide between Black women’s definition of themselves and how they are defined by the dominant group. This gap allows an oppressed subject to have a double consciousness. This concept relates to “the capacity to entertain two perspectives, two ways of thinking, and two ways of looking at the world”<sup>34</sup>. In other words, due to double consciousness, one can develop two cognitive perspectives namely the dominant one, and a subjective one. Double consciousness is empowering as it allows one to “take critical distance from the dominant perspective”<sup>35</sup> and “make comparisons and contrasts between”<sup>36</sup> the two perspectives. As a result, double consciousness allows an oppressed subject to apprehend two opposite stand points, and by extension reaching lucidity regarding its oppression. For example, Black feminist women can grasp how the representation of Black women by the dominant group stands at odd with their own experiences.

To sum up, in this section I claimed that the lack of mutual recognition between the different communities of a society is a striking sign of oppression. I showed one should pay attention to the under-representation of a particular community to as well as the way this community is perceived by the others.

---

<sup>32</sup> Medina, José, “Meta-Lucidity, Epistemic Heroes, and the Everyday Struggle Toward Epistemic Justice,” in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 15

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

<sup>34</sup> *Idem.*,

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>36</sup> *Idem.*,



*Key Terms:*

**Internalized oppression:** It refers to the gradual acceptance of oppression by the oppressed.

**Double consciousness:** The ability to develop two cognitive perspectives namely the dominant one, and a subjective one.

**Epistemic friction:** This expression refers to the clash between two conflicting perspectives namely how a subject sees him-self and how it is ignored and/or distorted by the others.

**Meta-lucidity:** being aware of the limits of one's standpoint

# What is epistemic injustice?

In this chapter, we will explore the concepts of epistemic injustice and Black feminist epistemology.

Before explaining these concepts, we have to first understand what epistemology is. Epistemology is the investigation of the standards by which we use to judge if a claim is knowledge<sup>37</sup>. Essentially, it is asking ourselves why we think we know something. For example, I can tell you that it will rain later. Do you think that I simply *believe* that it will rain, or that I *know* that it will? If I said that it will rain because I have a gut feeling that it will, you would probably think I simply *believe* that it will rain. What if I tell you instead that I saw dark clouds forming earlier, and I have data to show that it has always rained at this time for the last ten years? You would more likely think I *know* that it will rain. The standards that I have used are *objective*: my justification uses observable data and I do not give any weight to my personal opinion, e.g. my gut feeling.

Collins claims that academia in general uses the objective standards described above, and she terms this as “positivism”<sup>38</sup>. Positivism is a scientific way of describing reality by generalising using data. In collecting data, one seeks to be a detached observer; this will remove the values, vested interests, and emotions generated by the subjects’ class, race, sex, or unique situation.

Black feminist epistemology on the other hand, uses different standards to arrive at knowledge<sup>39</sup>. In contrast to the objective approach of positivism, African-American women emphasize *lived experience*<sup>40</sup>. Many Black women scholars use their own lived experience to choose what topics to investigate and how to do so. They also adopt an *ethics of*

---

<sup>37</sup> Collins, 252

<sup>38</sup> Collins, 255

<sup>39</sup> Collins, 254

<sup>40</sup> Collins, 260

*caring*<sup>41</sup>. This entails three points. Firstly, they emphasize the uniqueness of the individual, which is ignored under a detached approach to collecting data<sup>42</sup>. Secondly, they regard emotions as appropriate to judge whether one believes in the validity of one's argument<sup>43</sup>. Collins provides the example of where one sings a song to exhort others to respect each other. Without emotion, such a cry for respect "would be virtually meaningless", that is to say, it gives the impression that the singer is merely going through the motions of the song and does not really believe in the underlying message. If that is the case, it is difficult to see how that will convince others. Thirdly, they wish to develop the capacity for empathy amongst one another<sup>44</sup>. Further, these scholars also adopt an *ethic of personal accountability*<sup>45</sup>. Essentially, this means that they believe that individuals must be personally accountable for their knowledge claims. For example, in evaluating a Black male scholar's analysis of Black feminism, they might be interested in the details of that scholar's life, such as his relationships with Black women, marital status, and social background. If, for instance, this Black male scholar had treated Black women poorly, but his analysis appeared to support Black feminism, he probably cannot be held accountable for his analysis.

There is another difference in approach between the two types of epistemologies. Collins states that positivism encourages adversarial debates so as to obtain truth<sup>46</sup>. Returning to the example above, you might, for instance, question how my data was collected or perhaps show me that in three out of that ten years, it did not rain. However, in Black feminist epistemology, one uses dialogue to assess knowledge claims instead. This means that there is talk between two subjects on equal footing. In contrast, in an adversarial setting, if you disprove my claim, you are correct while I am wrong.

---

<sup>41</sup> Collins, 263

<sup>42</sup> Collins, 263

<sup>43</sup> Collins, 263

<sup>44</sup> Collins, 263

<sup>45</sup> Collins, 265

<sup>46</sup> Collins, 255

As we can see, Black feminist epistemology is very different from academia's. Since academia uses different standards by which a claim can be treated as knowledge, it follows that claims that are treated as knowledge under Black feminist epistemology will not be treated as such in academia<sup>47</sup>. This is unfair. Collins claims that, because academia is controlled mainly by elite White men, the knowledge validation processes adopted by academia are a reflection of their interests<sup>48</sup>. Black feminists cannot be seen as credible if what they think are knowledge claims are not treated as such by prevailing scholarly norms<sup>49</sup>. Their claims are thus suppressed in this way.

Such suppression has negative consequences. Collins provides the narratives of individual African-American women as an example. Their narratives about being single mothers are excluded from the academia's research methodologies, since it focuses on quantitative data. This ignores the individual experiences of such women, which provide a different picture of the commonly held notion that these women are lazy "welfare queens"<sup>50</sup>.

Hence, we should neither discard positive epistemology nor discount alternative ways of knowing. Collins encourages us to view Black feminist epistemology as an addition to the prevailing standards of knowledge, such that we can arrive at a more accurate view of the oppression affecting Black women<sup>51</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> Collins, 254

<sup>48</sup> Collins, 254

<sup>49</sup> Collins, 254

<sup>50</sup> Collins, 255

<sup>51</sup> Collins, 269

*Key Terms:*

**Epistemology:** the standards that we use to judge if a claim is knowledge

**Positivism:** a scientific way of describing reality by generalising using data

**Lived experience:** individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts on, are more believable than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences.

**Dialogue:** talk between two people of equal status

**Ethics of care:** emotions can be used to indicate that a person believes in his claim

**Ethic of personal accountability:** it is essential for individuals to bear full responsibility for what they claim

## Unit 2: What is oppression?

# What is sexism?

In this chapter, we will explore what is sexism and how it manifests as a form of oppression. In particular, applying Collins' idea of the matrix of domination covered in Unit 1, we examine how the domains of power are organised and other systems of oppressions intersect with sexism. Finally, we then briefly explore how feminism should target the organization of power in these domains and thereby end sexist oppression.

## **Hegemonic Domain**

To begin with, sexism is prejudice and discrimination against women on the basis of their sex, which results in gender inequality. As a form of oppression, sexism is enforced through the four different domains of power. In the hegemonic domain of power, social units such as families, the media, school curricula, and community cultures shape the prevailing societal attitude towards women. This consciousness then shapes the hegemonic ideology used to justify discriminatory practices and thereby entrench sexism as a “common sense” norm in society. For instance, in the family, women are often expected to conform to the traditional gendered role of the homemaker who should stay at home and cares for the family instead of pursuing a career. The media also influences the hegemonic culture by constantly focusing on bodily appearances and portraying women as sex objects. In schools, girls are inculcated from a young age patriarchal values to be demure and obedient. Pertinently, these gender stereotypes and discriminatory mindset forms the hegemonic ideology that pervades society. This hegemonic ideology then constantly reproduces controlling images — the distorted perception of women developed and used by men to justify oppression. These controlling images portray women as inferior dependents and pigeonhole women into prescribed gender roles. Through a hegemonic ideology, sexism takes root in the consciousness of both men and women and thereby materializes in practice.

## **Structural Domain**

Indeed, in the structural domain of power, gender inequality is prevalent in the policies and procedures of social institutions such as the

legal system, schools, employment, and the media. In employment, sexism manifests in the form of discriminatory practices in the workplace. In particular, women are less likely to be hired than men who have the same qualifications and are paid less for the same work<sup>52</sup>. This relates to the **glass ceiling effect** in a capitalist society where there is a pervasive resistance to women trying to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Indeed, the impact of gender bias in the education sector training is prevalent in the low number of women in science, technology, engineering, and math. Furthermore, sexuality education in schools often reinforces the hegemonic ideology by portraying girls as emotional or narcissistic and guys as domineering and mature<sup>53</sup>. Strikingly, laws and legislations also reflect an assumption that women are naturally weaker and dependent on men. For example, in Singapore, divorce law in the Women's Charter is premised on the assumption that women are unable to fend for themselves after being separated from their husbands. Thus, the law reflects a need to provide state-sanctioned affirmative action in the form of alimony available to only women and not men<sup>54</sup>. Besides the perception of women as inferior and dependent on men, the sexual focus on women's appearance is also prevalent, especially in the media. In the service sector, aircrew grooming standards and uniform dictates that stewardesses to put on specific make-ups and wear figure hugging sarongs or miniskirts<sup>55</sup>.

### **Disciplinary Domain**

Moreover, the disciplinary domain manages power relations between men as the oppressors and women as the oppressed. That is,

---

<sup>52</sup> See Correll, Shelley J., Stephen Benard, and In Paik. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297-339. doi:10.1086/511799.

<sup>53</sup> See Lee, Pearl. "Former HCI Students Want School to Suspend Sexuality Education Workshop." *The Straits Times*. January 19, 2016. Accessed April 22, 2018. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/former-hci-students-want-school-to-suspend-sexuality-education-workshop>.

<sup>54</sup> Women's Charter (2009 Rev. Ed.). s. 69.

<sup>55</sup> See Paris, Natalie. "'Sexism' in the Sky: How Do Airlines Get Away with It?" *The Telegraph*. February 04, 2016. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/Sexism-in-the-sky-how-do-airlines-get-away-with-it/>.



through practices that discipline and control women, men exercise power over women to dominate them. In schools, strict rules on dress codes is one way to regulate the female identity and establish sexist discrimination as the norm. Particularly, young girls are punished disproportionately for their attire that would “distract” boys. At the work place, short maternity leave and inflexible working arrangement often penalize a mother for attempting to divide her attention between a career and motherhood. Lack of institutional support such as inadequate family-leave policies often left a mother with no choice but to resign in order to take care of her children. Thus, bureaucratic control thus serves to compel women to adhere to their prescribed gendered roles as stay-at-home mothers.

### **Interpersonal Domain**

In the interpersonal domain of power, sexism is perpetuated through discriminatory practices of everyday lived experience. Here, individuals are co-opted to internalise and echo the hegemonic ideology in their interpersonal relationships. In relationships between men and women, the former often oppresses the latter through **microaggressions**, which refers to the casual degradation of women in interpersonal interactions such as sexual harassment and the use of sexist language. More importantly, microaggressions also happen among women themselves who are subjected to other forms of oppression. For instance, a white bourgeois woman may not understand and thus trivialize the socioeconomic struggle of a black impoverished women. Here, we see different forms of oppression such as classism, racism, and sexism overlap with each other. This demonstrates the intersectionality of sexism where different forms of oppression shape the experience of oppressed women. As a result, women are also complicit in perpetuating sexism in their everyday interactions.

### **The Way Forward**

Thus, the problem of sexism is hard to negotiate, and rightly so. Intersectionality thus provides a helpful lens for feminists to recognize that the eradication of sexism requires concurrent efforts to address other forms of oppression. Where this agreement ends, however, is on the question of the objective of feminism. On one hand, liberal feminists believe that the ultimate aim is to achieve socioeconomic equality with

men, such as earning the same wage. On the other hand, radical feminists focus on changing the underlying hegemonic ideology that perpetuates sexism, such as changing the values taught in schools. While the former has engendered some progress, especially among the white bourgeoisie, there is more to be desired among black impoverished women. Ultimately, since feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, feminists should aim to change the underlying hegemonic ideology that pervades the domains of power in our capitalist society.

*Key Terms:*

**Glass ceiling effect:** A metaphor used to portray the pervasive resistance to a demographic group from reaching beyond a certain level in the social hierarchy.

**Microaggression:** The causal degradation between individuals in their interpersonal day-to-day interactions.

# What is Ableism?

This section will provide a comprehensive overview of what the term **ableism** means and how its practices are used to oppress **people with disabilities**. To begin, there are several types of disabilities: physical, sensory, learning, developmental, and intellectual. These disabilities can range from being mild to severe, temporary to permanent, and visible to invisible. Ableism is defined as “discrimination and social prejudice against individuals with [any of the aforementioned] disabilities in favor of those who are **non-disabled**”<sup>56</sup>.

Ableism, like many other forms of “-ism” (i.e. racism, sexism, classism), describes the discrimination of those who are with disabilities by suggesting that society subscribes to **compulsory able-bodiedness**, or the idea that what is moral and desirable is for people to be nondisabled or free from disability<sup>57</sup>. For example, walking is a more socially valued form of movement than moving via a wheelchair<sup>58</sup>. The term compulsory able-bodiedness portrays people with disabilities as solely defined by their disabilities and as inferior to those who are non-disabled.

Another example of ableism is when those who are non-disabled use the phrases “suffers from” and “afflicted by” to describe people with disabilities, as if the disability itself is an undesirable and abnormal condition that can and should be prevented, and more importantly, cured. It also illustrates people with disabilities as hapless victims due to their disability. A recent example of how disability is (mis)represented is how the death of the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking was framed. Though the media describes Hawking’s revolutionary scientific accomplishments, it mainly portrays his achievements as those that involved “overcoming” his amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or described his death as “freeing” him from

---

<sup>56</sup> *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2018):1, doi:10.18061/dsq.v36i3.

<sup>57</sup> Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed. (Routledge), 87.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Hehir, “Confronting Ableism.,” *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 5 (2007): 9.

physical constraints<sup>59</sup>. This eagerness to focus on his disability reduces Hawking to just his disability and nothing else. The fact is that he achieved all he had worked for *with* his disability, not *in spite of* it. To suggest that Hawking's death was liberation from his ALS suggests to other people with disability to entertain death as a possible solution to their disability. Unfortunately, this dehumanizing attitude towards people with disabilities happens too often, leading to exclusion from their communities and unequal access to employment, education, and other societal requirements.

**Disability studies** emerged in response to ableism by promoting full and equal participation of people with disabilities in society and generating theoretical and practical knowledge about disability. The goal of the discipline is to educate and develop discourse about disability among scholars, advocates, and other people concerned with the issues of people with disabilities<sup>60</sup>.

As mentioned before, disability is regarded as a medical problem that requires a "cure" or treatment to fix it. The traditional theory for understanding disability has been the **medical model of disability**, which views disability as an intrinsic characteristic of the person<sup>61</sup>. In other words, the individuals are the source of the problem and therefore are the embodiment of their physical/ learning/ intellectual/ developmental/ sensory impairments. This theory for disability is heavily based on **positivism**, an approach to the social sciences that specifically utilizes scientific evidence to create objective generalizations or truths about the way society operates and functions<sup>62</sup>. Through this approach, distance from factors that would influence the truth, such as race, gender,

---

<sup>59</sup> Keah Brown, "Saying Stephen Hawking Is "Free" From His Wheelchair Is Ableist," *Teen Vogue*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/stephen-hawking-free-from-his-wheelchair-ableist>.

<sup>60</sup> Carli Friedman and Aleksa L. Owen, "Defining Disability: Understandings of and Attitudes Towards Ableism and Disability," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2017): 1.

<sup>61</sup> David L. Hosking, "Critical Disability Theory," proceedings of Disability Studies Conference, Lancaster University, UK, 6-7.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 272.

class, etc., allows for a “true” understanding of disability. However, as a result, the medical model decontextualizes disability from the ableist society in which people with disabilities live. It assumes that disability is a deficit condition already existing within an individual.

With an emphasis of medical treatment as a solution to disability, the model also places more weight on the words of health professionals rather than the voices of people with disabilities when it comes to diagnosis and treatment. This can lead to the separation of people with disabilities from the rest of the population on the grounds of medical treatment (i.e. psychiatric hospitals). As a result, people with disabilities often feel insulted, silenced, or excluded because they are treated as if their entire body was inhibited by impairments<sup>63</sup>. They are often assumed to be only able to perform simple, repetitive tasks that require minimal effort and are met with pity when discussing their disability. When people with disabilities talk about the positives of their disability (i.e. deaf culture), the non-disabled are shocked and in disbelief that the disabilities are not acting as disadvantages. In actuality, many people with disabilities mainly experience disadvantage from the social attitudes and institutional norms that discriminate against them, not from the disability itself.

As a response to the dominant theory (medical model) on disability, one of the main arguments discussed in disability studies is the **social model of disability**. The social model aims to counter the assumptions or expectations of the quality of life (i.e. inability to perform) for people with disability that not only sustains the social attitudes and institutional norms but also create more disability by degrading them as full human beings<sup>64</sup>. One of the goals of the social model is to construct a neutral concept of disability that neither devalues disability or implies inadequacy in those with disabilities.

---

<sup>63</sup> Sara Goering, "Rethinking Disability: The Social Model of Disability and Chronic Disease," *Current Reviews in Musculoskeletal Medicine* 8, no. 2 (2015): 1, doi:10.1007/s12178-015-9273-z.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

This model is based on the principle that disability is a social construct and not the inevitable consequence of **impairment**, or state of body that is non-standard<sup>65</sup>. It argues that the disadvantages of disability are constructed when the social environment fails to meet the needs of people with disabilities because they do not match the social expectation of ‘normalcy’<sup>66</sup>. For example, a student who is born blind may understand blindness as a neutral way of living, not a deficit or problem. Blindness is only regarded as a disadvantage when social and institutional arrangements do not take in account the student’s impairment. In the case of a visually impaired student, they may have limited educational opportunity because many schools do not want or have the resources (i.e. Braille material) to accommodate for them. Even when they are accepted, non-disableds’ assumption that the visually impaired are be too dependent on others for assistance will create tensions between them and the student with visual impairment.

By using the social model, Disability Studies academics are able to understand the interplay between disability and other parts of a person’s identity. In the essay, “Crippin’ Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-Location, and the School-to Prison Pipeline”, Nirmala Erevelles draws the connection between race, disability, and the school-to-prison pipeline, which is mapped with a linear pathway from segregated classrooms, alternative schools, dropouts, alienation from the labor market, and eventually to prison. She describes how the disabled and people of color are removed from public spaces to more restrictive spaces of isolation and violence because they are negatively pathologized to be “damaged” (whether physically or mentally). For instance, student of color who act out in class are diagnosed with labels like disruptive behavior disorder, substance abuse disorder, mentally ill, etc. With these labels of disability, it gives the school and later prison reasons for isolation and incarceration. In fact, children with disabilities as a whole are six times more likely to enter the juvenile legal system than those who are non-disabled; this rate grossly increases when they are people of

---

<sup>65</sup> Hosking, "Critical Disability Theory.", 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

color<sup>67</sup>. On the other hand, white students with disabilities would be given treatment because their disabilities are not “natural” and therefore can be fixed with intervention (this is an example of how the medical model of understanding disability is applied). They would not enter the school-to-prison pipeline; however, the students of color with disabilities would be forced into it and be subjected to the violence in the prison system. The students of color would be oppressed by the school, criminal justice system, and later the other structural domains (i.e. laws, policies) described by Collins’ domains of power because they will be treated as criminals rather than as people with disability<sup>68</sup>. As shown, ableism does not only happen isolation; it is inextricably linked with other forms of discrimination.

The intersectional connection between race and disability would not have been drawn if the study followed the medical model of disability. Through the social model of disability, the consequences of segregation and pathologization of those who have disability are understood and only then can more radical and inclusive politics and social movements develop to resist ableism.

#### *Key Terms:*

**Ableism:** Discrimination and social prejudice against individuals with physical, sensory, learning, developmental, and intellectual disabilities in favor of those who are non-disabled.

**Compulsory able-bodiedness:** the insistence that what is moral and desirable within neoliberal social context of late capitalism are necessarily heteronormative and nondisabled.

**Disability Studies:** An interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field that challenges ableism by promoting full and equal participation of people

---

<sup>67</sup> Talila A. Lewis, "Honoring Arnaldo Rios-Soto & Charles Kinsey: Achieving Liberation Through Disability Solidarity," *TALILA A. LEWIS*, July 22, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 203, 276.

with disabilities in society and generating theoretical and practical knowledge about disability; it educates and develops discourse about disability (i.e. how it is represented and perceived in society) among scholars, advocates, and other people concerned with the issues of people with disabilities

**Disability:** disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical, sensory, and mental impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the social activities with the rest of the population.

**Impairment:** Practical restriction due to limitations in the physical, mental, and/or sensory functioning of specific organs, limbs, or mechanisms in the body.

**Medical Model of Disability:** The traditional theory for understanding disability that regard disability as an intrinsic characteristic of the person and as a medical problem that requires medical treatment prescribed by credible health professionals to be cured/treated.

**Non-disabled:** Someone who does not identify as having a disability; this term is used in opposed to the term “able-bodied” because the latter implies that all people living with disabilities lack bodies that are capable or abilities to use their bodies well.

**People with Disability/Disabilities:** Preferred terminology for those people who identify as having a disability; this term uses people-first language instead of identity-first language in order to avoid defining people in terms of their impairment.

**Positivism:** a theoretical approach to the social sciences that specifically utilizes scientific evidence to create objective generalizations or truths about the way society operates and function; it places rational, empirical knowledge above all other epistemologies and attempts to remove as much of the human bias/characteristics in the process.



**Social Model of Disability:** a model of understanding disability that counters the traditional medical model by distinguishing impairment from disability and identifying disability as a disadvantage that stems from the social attitudes and institutional norms that discriminate against people with disabilities, not from the disability itself

# What is queerphobia?

In this section, we will explore another dimension of oppression, **queerphobia**, which is the oppression and discrimination of **queer** people. “**Queerness**” is a complex concept that has many lines of intersection even within its own domain. However, for the purposes of this section, queer identity can roughly be divided into two aspects: 1) **gender**, and 2) **sexuality**. While gender and sexuality are undoubtedly linked and interact to create unique dimensions of queerness for different individuals, I shall discuss some main facets of oppression for each aspect of queerness before discussing them together and setting up an understanding of queerness that is further complicated by other forms of **intersectionality** that involve more than just gender and sexuality.

Firstly, I will discuss the oppression of queer gender identities and presentations, where “gender identities” refers to the genders that people personally identify as, and “**presentations**” refers to the way they perform that gender, through behaviour and/or personal style and clothing. Here, “queer gender identity” is another way of referring to people whose gender identity does not match the one they were assigned at birth (e.g., trans woman, or **non-binary** person). The sort of oppression of queer genders (i.e., transphobia) involved here is closely linked to the misogynistic oppression of women as discussed earlier in Unit 2.1. The main similarity between the gendered oppression of women and the gendered oppression of queer identities such as **transgender** individuals and **drag artists**, is that it mainly involves the policing of masculinity and femininity and the enforcement of a strict **gender binary**, where “woman” and “man” are seen as the only valid genders, and anything that does not fit into that neat dichotomy is vilified.

“Transphobia”, like the terms “queerphobia” and “**homophobia**”, refer to the discrimination and oppression of a group of people; in this case, transgender people. This sort of transphobic oppression takes place on multiple levels. On one level, oppression of transgender individuals could take the form of the direct refusal to grant trans people certain political and personal rights, be it the ability to change their legal genders on official documents, the right to safe and

affordable healthcare, or access to gender-neutral restrooms in public spaces. These barriers to public access and political rights greatly hinder the ability of trans people to actively participate in public and social life, essentially cutting them off and erasing them from social and political institutions.

On another level, transgender individuals' personal identities are also constantly invalidated and erased through transmisogynistic oppression that seeks to deny the individual's right to identify as the gender(s) they are, or no gender at all. **Transmisogyny** is similar to **misogyny**, but is particularly directed towards trans people, especially **transfeminine** people, who were assigned male at birth, but identify more closely with femininity than masculinity<sup>69</sup>. Such erasure could occur through the oppressive barriers explained above, but also through microaggressive tactics to invalidate and ignore trans people's gender identities. For example, refusing to respect a trans person's pronouns, or asking what genitals a trans person really has (or the somewhat more insidious, "were they a man or a woman?") are many ways that trans identities are constantly being undermined and oppressed in everyday interactions.

Historically, the contributions made by and experiences of transgender individuals have also been largely erased and cast to the sidelines. For example, Sylvia Rivera's "Queens in Exile, The Forgotten Ones" explains how trans women and butch women were seen as "freaks" and as a subculture within the queer community<sup>70</sup>. Also, despite playing a large role in the queer resistance and **LGBT** movement at the time around the Stonewall Riots, trans women like Rivera were

---

<sup>69</sup> Another way to understand transfeminine identity is to say that a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) defines closer towards the feminine side of the gender spectrum. However, there is some dispute as to whether gender should be described as a linear spectrum, with masculinity and femininity on either end. This is because such a spectrum seems to uphold the notions of a perfect masculinity and perfect femininity, and does not take into account overlaps of feminine and masculine traits that occur simultaneously or the possibility of defining one's gender outside of such a system.

<sup>70</sup> Rivera, 2002

constantly kept out of the political narrative of resistance, not given credit nor a platform to fight for the rights they need.

The oppression of trans individuals also results in widespread transphobic violence. For example, it is very common that violence is used to erase or hide the existence of transgender and/or **intersex** individuals from the time of their infancy. Intersex people are born with different variations of sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, genitals, sex hormones, etc.) that do not neatly fit into the categories of “female” or male”. Even though most variations associated with being intersex do not pose medical risks<sup>71</sup>, **Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM)** is a commonly practiced on intersex infants to “fix” them. Forced genital mutilation is where the genitals of an intersex person are surgically reconstructed to conform to the transmisogynistic ideals of what female or male genitals look like, and is often unnecessary and dangerous. This example relates back to the misogynistic ideas that were discussed in Unit 2.1, where gender policing is taken to the extreme and used to eradicate people who do not fit in, either culturally or biologically. Such transphobic violence is also taken into adulthood, where people whose gender identities or performance do not fit in with what the dominant culture dictates, face persecution and even violence and murder<sup>72</sup>. As Fausto-Sterling puts it, “[t]he intersexual or transgendered person who projects a social gender – what Kessler calls “cultural genitals” – that conflicts with his or her physical genitals still may die for the transgression. Hence legal protection for people whose cultural and physical genitals do not match is needed during the current transition to a more gender-diverse world”<sup>73</sup>.

---

<sup>71</sup> Intersex Society of North America, 2005

<sup>72</sup> Violence against transgender people, particular trans women of colour, has become increasingly common, with the number of transgender deaths rising at an alarming rate from year to year. (Lees, 2018; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; McBride, 2017)

<sup>73</sup> Fausto-Sterling, 2000, P. 23

In addition to transphobia and trans erasure, queerphobia also includes the oppression of people with non-normative sexualities<sup>74</sup>, as defined by the dominant groups in society. Thus, people who are not heterosexual are often demonised and/or invalidated for their sexual or romantic attraction (or lack thereof) to people of certain genders. Just as with transphobic oppression, the oppression of queer sexualities can come in different forms, from interpersonal attacks, erasure from mainstream media, the denial of social and political rights like that of marriage and adoption, to violent “corrective”<sup>75</sup> raping and murder. The oppression of one’s sexuality is also a complicated issue, as even within queer communities, certain sexualities are subjugated over others. For example, while both homosexuality and **bisexuality** are considered non-normative within the realm of **heteronormative** societies, bisexual individuals are constantly marginalised and invalidated, even by people with their own communities.

While gender and sexuality have been discussed separately in this chapter, they undoubtedly occur together in reality. Thus, as is expected, the different dimensions of queerphobia become more complicated when you take into account both of these aspects of queer identity. Furthermore, other aspects of an individual’s identity, such as race, class, and any disabilities they might have, also affect their own experience as a queer individual, forming multiple intersecting lines of oppression and privilege. It might be tempting to say, for example, that to be transgender and to have a disability is to suffer a double oppression. However, the reality is much more complicated, as different sources of oppression work with different sources of privilege to create a unique experience for each individual, where oppressions cannot be merely added on to one another to be understood comprehensively. Thus, while it is important to focus on specific dimensions of oppression when forming acts of resistance, it must be noted that different oppressions

---

<sup>74</sup> “Non-normative” meaning not normalised in dominant society. An example of a non-normative sexuality is homosexuality or bisexuality, because these sexualities are not considered “normal” or expected within most societies.

<sup>75</sup> “Corrective” raping is a term that refers to the rape of homosexual individuals by people of another gender (usually committed by heterosexual men on lesbian women) that is rationalised as an act of “correcting” somebody’s queer sexual desires.

intersect and overlap, and to be committed to resisting the unfair treatment of any one group is to view each person within the group as a whole individual who is not defined merely by the labels they use.

*Key Terms:*

**Bisexual/Bisexuality:** A bisexual person is somebody who is attracted to two or more genders. The prefix “bi” is usually understood as “two”, and so, a common understanding of bisexuality is a person who is attracted to both men and women, though such a binary understanding of bisexuality is not accepted or used by everybody with this label.

**Drag Artist:** A drag artist is a person who performs, and while during performances, dress and behave in hyper-feminine and/or hyper-masculine manners that may or may not conform to the stereotypes about the performer’s gender. For example, a drag queen is somebody whose performance exaggerates femininity, and a drag king is somebody whose performance exaggerates masculinity. However, despite the hyper-gendered performances, many drag artists blur the lines between femininity and masculinity, playing around with stereotypes and notions of gender.

**Gender:** The gender of a person is their state of identifying with some gender identity, such as “woman”, “non-binary”, or “man”. It is distinct from sex, as gender does not have to coincide with certain physical or biological traits.

**Gender Binary:** The gender binary is a concept arguing that there are only two genders: women, and men, and does not include the possibilities of other genders that do not conform to those standards.

**Gender Presentation:** One’s gender presentation is the way they “perform” or “present” their gender in the way they behave, the clothes they wear, etc.

**Heteronormativity/Heteronormative:** “Heteronormativity” is the worldview that argues and promotes heterosexuality as the only normal sexual orientation.

**Homophobia:** Homophobia is the discrimination of and prejudice against homosexuality. However, it can more widely be used to describe behaviours and mindsets that discriminate against anybody who is not heterosexual, or certain traits that are not considered “heterosexual”. For example, a person who thinks it is disgusting when their bisexual friend is attracted to somebody of the same gender, can be considered to have displayed homophobic behaviour, even though the subject of that discrimination is not strictly homosexual, but bisexual.

**Intersex:** Intersex people are born with different variations of sex characteristics (including hormones, genitals, chromosomes, etc.) that do not conform neatly into the biological and medical definitions of “female” and “male” that are prevalent in society at the time.

**Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM):** IGM is a type of surgery where the genitals of an intersex person are surgically reconstructed to conform to the dominant ideals of what female or male genitals look like at the time, and is often unnecessary and dangerous.

**LGBT:** An acronym that stands for “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual”, and “transgender”. Another common variations are LGBTQIA+, which also includes “queer” or “questioning”, “intersex”, and “agender” or “ally”, with the “+” indicating more queer identities. It is often used as a catch-all to refer to the queer community.

**Misogyny:** Dislike or contempt against women

**Non-binary:** A person who is non-binary identifies as a gender that is not strictly “woman” or “man”, either somewhere inbetween those two genders, or somewhere outside of the spectrum entirely.

**Queer/Queerness:** A queer person is one whose sexuality and/or gender does not conform to the heteronormative and transmisogynistic standards of dominant society. Queerness is the state of being queer.

**Queerphobia:** Like homophobia, queerphobia is the discrimination of and prejudice against queer people and queerness.

**Sexuality:** “Sexuality” refers to a person’s sexual orientation or preferences, or could also refer more generally to a person’s capacity for sexual feelings and attraction. When discussing queer identities, the term most likely refers to the former rather than the latter.

**Transfeminine:** A person who is transfeminine is somebody who was assigned male at birth, but identifies more closely with femininity than masculinity. Another way to understand transfeminine identity is to say that a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) defines closer towards the feminine side of the gender spectrum. However, there is some dispute as to whether gender should be described as a linear spectrum, with masculinity and femininity on either end. This is because such a spectrum seems to uphold the notions of a perfect masculinity and perfect femininity, and does not take into account overlaps of feminine and masculine traits that occur simultaneously or the possibility of defining one’s gender outside of such a system.

**Transgender:** A transgender person is one whose gender identity does not conform to the gender that they were assigned at birth

**Transmasculine:** A person who is transmasculine is somebody who was **assigned female at birth (AFAB)**, but identifies more closely with femininity than masculinity. Another way to understand transfeminine identity is to say that an AFAB person defines closer towards the masculine side of the gender spectrum. However, there is some dispute as to whether gender should be described as a linear spectrum, with masculinity and femininity on either end. This is because such a spectrum seems to uphold the notions of a perfect masculinity and perfect femininity, and does not take into account overlaps of feminine and masculine traits that occur simultaneously or the possibility of defining one’s gender outside of such a system.

**Transmisogyny:** Transmisogyny is similar to misogyny, but is particularly directed towards trans people, especially transfeminine



people, who were assigned male at birth, but identify more closely with femininity than masculinity.

**Transphobia:** The discrimination of and prejudice against transgender people and more generally, any notion of gender that does not adhere to the prevailing norms of society and the notion of a female-male binary.

# Exploring racism as a social phenomenon

## Defining racism as a system of domination

Similar to other forms of oppression discussed in previous chapters, racism is rooted in the ability of a group of people to subjugate other groups of people, only this time it is on the basis of their race. This subjugation is achieved by constructing the **social realities** of the oppressed persons in a manner that denies them access to rights and privileges enjoyed by those considered to be racially superior. Social reality can be understood as the ways in which we navigate around the various social, economic and political structures in society with respect to our **visible and invisible identities**, thereby influencing not only how we are seen and treated by others, but also how we see and treat ourselves. For example, a Black woman job hunting in the corporate sector in America is less likely to wear her hair in its kinky natural form and would opt to straighten it even though straightening it is an added expense and is unhealthy for her hair. This is because American society, which is largely governed by race, has promoted white standards of beauty as the norm and therefore her hair would be perceived as untidy and she as unprofessional. In this light, racism can first and foremost be understood as a system of domination.

When you begin to see that racism is a system of domination, then you begin to see that the current widely accepted definition of racism, which is centered on **prejudice**, is too simplistic. Racism goes beyond one simply being prejudiced against people of a certain race; it is hinged on the ability of one to have the power to act on this prejudice.

## How does racism manifest itself in different societies and what are its effects?

Racism is integrated within a larger **matrix of domination**. Defined by Patricia Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, a matrix of domination refers to the “overall organizations of hierarchical power relations for any society”, characterized by “a particular arrangement of intersecting forms of oppression [and] “a particular organization of

domains of power.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, racism works in union with other forms of oppression, in multiple ways, across different contexts and depending on how the domains of power, which have been explained in previous chapters, have been structured. And because it is contextual and dependent on who is favoured by the domains of power, the racial identities of the oppressed and the oppressor vary.

I use the following case study based on a fictional character, Maryanne, to show how some of the domains of power can mutually reinforce each other to maintain racism in the US.

Maryanne is a Black woman living with her son in an **inner-city neighbourhood** in New York where most of her neighbours are **people of colour**. She works both as a domestic helper and as a waitress to make ends meet. However, she cannot afford to send her son to a private school and so he has to attend a public school in the neighbourhood which is understaffed and has regular power outages. A Black boy was recently gunned down near the restaurant where Maryanne works and as Maryanne was serving a white couple, she overheard them say that the 13-year-old victim was probably involved in some gang activity and had tried to resist arrest. Maryanne, who had known the boy and his family for some years now, knew better but was unable to bring herself to speak up as her manager would be angry and she could not afford to risk her job.

From the case study above, it can be seen that the structural domain of power works by restricting racial minorities such as Maryanne to low-income residential areas where they cannot access good social services such as proper schooling for their children. The disciplinary domain of power builds on this by ensuring that Maryanne is distracted by her low income, which is also a function of class exploitation, by forcing her to work two jobs that cater towards her expenses. In this distraction, Maryanne does not have the time or energy to question her social reality even though she is probably aware of the injustice in it. Furthermore, she cannot risk her job by responding to the misinformed

---

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Hills Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2000), 299.

allegations posed by the white couple. These allegations stem from the hegemonic domain of power which perpetuates **controlling images** of Black men as violent thus ensuring that even in the event where a Black boy was wrongfully treated, one's initial reaction is to doubt his innocence.

This case study is a snapshot of how the domains of power can preserve racism. From it, we can also see some of the effects of racism. Maryanne, who represents millions of Black Americans and to an extent other people of colour living in America, is denied access to the same socio-economic privileges afforded to white people, such as good housing, hence the dominant presence of people of colour in her neighbourhood. For America, the justification of this denial and its continued perpetuation can be traced back to **slavery** when Black Africans were viewed as subhuman and therefore unworthy of the same rights and privileges granted to white people. On a global level, racist structures can be attributed to **colonialism** which also treated non-whites as subhuman.

One of the most pervasive effects of racism is that it convinces the oppressed that they are inherently inferior. In his book, *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon shows how as a result of colonization, the Negro aspires towards whiteness, likening it to a "slow evolution of monkey into man."<sup>77</sup> In an effort to "become a man", the oppressed begins to adopt the mannerisms of his oppressor as he tries to distance himself from his supposed inherent barbarism. The closer he is to looking, thinking, and acting like the oppressor, the closer he thinks he is to being seen as a man and accessing the same spaces enjoyed exclusively by the oppressor. He forgets however that the oppressor will always consider him to be beneath him no matter how much he tries to imitate him.

Racism, just like other forms of oppression, feeds off of our acceptance of domination as the basis of our social organizations. As long as we continue to endorse this culture of domination, do we support

---

<sup>77</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1967), 8.

the subjugation of the oppressed, whether or not we directly benefit or participate in it.

*Key Terms:*

**Colonialism:** This is the policy of a nation seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or territories, generally with the aim of exploiting them to the benefit of the colonizing country and “helping” the colonies modernize in terms defined by the colonizers, especially in economics, religion and health.

**Controlling images:** Defined by Patricia Hill Collins, these refer to the stereotypical images of a particular identity group used by the oppressor to make various forms of social injustice appear as normal part of everyday life.

**Inner-city neighbourhood:** In the United States, the term "inner city" is often used as a euphemism for lower-income residential districts in the city centre and nearby areas—with the additional connotation of impoverished minority neighbourhoods.

**Matrix of domination:** As defined by Patricia Hill Collins, this is the overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society. Any specific matrix of domination has (1) a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, e.g., race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age; and (2) a particular organization of its domains of power, e.g., structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

**People of colour:** Used primarily in the United States to describe any person who is not white. The term encompasses all non-white peoples, emphasizing common experiences of systemic racism.

**Prejudice:** Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

**Slavery:** Broadly, slavery refers to any system which allows individuals to own, buy and sell other individuals and treat them as property. In this chapter, it is used in reference to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which saw the buying, selling and transporting of captured Africans to the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries.

**Social realities:** The ways in which we navigate around the various social, economic and political structures in society with respect to our visible and invisible identities, thereby influencing not only how we are seen and treated by others, but also how we see and treat ourselves.

**Visible and invisible identities:** These refer to social markers which influence our social realities. Example of visible identities are race and gender and invisible identities are sexual orientation and social class. Important to note is that some invisible identities may be made visible through certain actions associated with a certain identity.

# What is economic oppression?

The success of many modern economies has been attributed to **capitalism**, or an economic system characterised by the private ownership of property and a free market. Under capitalism, even though a government does not regulate the production of each good, people's needs and wants leads others to produce the goods. If too many goods are produced, producers know because the goods do not sell anymore. People work hard, because they know they will be rewarded with wages. The mechanism of capitalism, that people act on their personal interests and end up contributing to an economy, seems almost magical. It leads us to ask, 'Is everyone happy under the capitalist system?' The answer is that capitalism creates economic class, which leads to economic oppression of the poor working class.

## Economic Oppression Under Capitalism

Before the rapid spread of capitalism in the late 1900s, there were many voices highlighting how capitalism is oppressive and other systems are necessary. One avid critic of capitalism was Julius K. Nyerere, the first prime minister of Tanzania. He stressed that the capitalist mindset colonisers brought into Africa destroyed **African Socialism**, a system of sharing and support based on the belief that a society should be like a family. Then what is this capitalist mindset? The capitalist mindset is prioritising the good of individuals over the good of the community. People with a capitalist mindset get rich by taking advantage of other people's labour. They use wealth to dominate other people even more, instead of using it to help the community. Under capitalism, rich people get paid a salary disproportionate not only to their labour but also to the rest of the community. Land becomes a commodity that one can buy and sell: if a man claims a piece of land, goes to the Moon, and comes back and the price of the land happens to go up, he would earn money, even without any work. When land becomes an individual's property, members of the community that want to actually use the land for agriculture have to pay rent. Even when farmers pay rent and produce the goods, they get little in return, because the value of goods are determined based on the financial profit extractable, rather than the importance to the community. Nyerere believed that under

capitalism, people become so busy fulfilling their own needs that there is a loss of security as a member of a community. His argument illustrates the oppressive aspect present in any capitalist society: with an individualistic attitude, the rich perpetuate the gap in economic class by abusing land and wealth.

### **Economic Oppression and Racism**

Now we will see not only how colonialism brings economic oppression but also how economic oppression leads to racism, through the ideas of Frantz Fanon. Fanon is a psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary from Martinique, which is still occupied by France. In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, he refutes the ideas of French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni. Mannoni argues that the economic dimension of oppression is unrelated to racism, providing the reason that white labourers are at least as racist as employers and managers. To refute this claim, Fanon says poor whites people's racism is also related to economic factors because they attempt to prove themselves an elite by treating black people as inferior. Economic oppression in this context can be divided into two kinds: economic oppression against poor white people and economic oppression against black people. Poor white people feel powerless under an economic system that undermines their value and the value of their labour. These people attempt to elevate their relative status by characterising black peoples' status as even lower. To protect the poor white people from being worse off, colonialists impose an economic system that excludes black people even more, in areas such as employment and wage. Therefore, black people face not only racism caused by economic oppression to poor white people but also economic oppression caused by colonialist racism. From Fanon's argument, we can see that economic oppression and racism are closely linked.

### **Economic Oppression and Bourgeois Activism**

We must not neglect oppression where it's least expected: in the fight against oppression. Author and social activist bell hooks stresses the economic oppression of working class women by mainstream feminism. The definition of 'feminism', according to mainstream feminism is that feminism is a movement aimed at establishing equal



status for women and men. Such a definition marginalises working class and poor women because it neglects a crucial dimension of oppression: economic class. Working class women do not desire the same status as men because these women are aware that men in their economic class are also oppressed. However, bourgeois white feminists support the definition because it downplays their class privilege and highlights their marginal status as women. Due to the lack of a unified definition of feminism other than social equality, bourgeois women dominate feminist movements and make women from lower classes feel powerless. Privileged women have access to academia and develop feminist theory, which is the guiding principle to action in the feminist movement. Hence, underprivileged women reject feminism and privileged women are content about maintaining control over the feminist movement. Bourgeois feminists attempt to achieve social equality between men and women without radical change, because any fundamental change in the system with undermines their class privilege. Due to their reluctance to achieve change that affects class structure and due to a stance oppressive against working class women, they end up perpetuating gender oppression rather than fighting against it.

Activism that reinforces economic oppression fails not only in its inclusiveness but also in its effectiveness against the specific dimension of oppression it seeks to address. In the next unit, we will examine the ways in which we can resist the different dimensions of oppression.

*Key Terms:*

**Capitalism:** An economic system characterised by the private ownership of property and a free market

**African Socialism:** A system of sharing and support in traditional African society, based on the belief that a society should be like a family

## Unit 3: How do we resist oppression?

# What is the role of epistemology in resisting injustice?

The study of what knowledge we believe and why we choose to believe it is known as **epistemology**. As we have explored in the last chapter of Unit 1, certain epistemologies are often valued more than others. Many times, the dominant group gets to make the decision of what knowledge is considered valuable and credible, which leads to the devaluation of knowledge produced by marginalized groups. For example, in academia we often place value on scientific, logical, quantitative data – defined by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* as “**positivism**” – as the most legitimate form of knowledge. Collins contrasts this to black feminist epistemology, which focuses instead on lived experience and emotions.

The valuation of certain epistemologies over others has allowed for an overrepresentation of certain types of ideas and a silencing of others. Thus, how can our understanding of different epistemologies actively push against the injustices we see around us? Our approach to epistemology can resist injustice first by recognizing the ways we have been socialized to value certain epistemologies over others and then by acting upon that reflection to create fuller, more representative epistemologies.

## Recognizing Our Socialization

First, we must acknowledge that we have been taught to value objectivity over subjectivity; this takes several forms, such as valuing positivism over lived experience, or reason over emotion. It is important to recognize the importance of lived experience in the creation of knowledge, because taking a stance of positivism can end up perpetuating certain existing forms of oppression. For example, in America, there have been many cases of discrimination and violence against black individuals, including situations ranging from two black men being arrested for sitting in Starbucks while waiting for a third friend to multiple unarmed black men and women being shot by police officers.

Occurrences like these have led to the rise and continuation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. There have been many dissenters to the movement who claim that black people are playing the “race card” by focusing unnecessarily on race. They may push back against the BLM movement by citing statistics that show that the number of black individuals killed by other black individuals is far greater than the number of black individuals killed by police officers. However, for black people living in America, they have grown up experiencing differential treatment; they have seen how they are watched more closely when they enter stores, or how they are questioned more thoroughly when stopped for “routine traffic stops.” Their race is something that affects their everyday lives and that affects how people around them treat them, so they don’t feel like there is any “race card” to be played. Thus, by insisting on the importance of statistics, people who think that they are being objective about the situation end up invalidating black individuals’ lived experiences and the epistemology that they have created.

Another dichotomy between epistemologies that we must recognize holds us back from addressing injustice is that between reason and emotion. While reason can be an effective way to lay out formal arguments and hold constructive dialogues, without emotion it can lack the empathy and applicability necessary to create radical change. When it comes to fighting against oppression, people are often fueled by strong emotions, whether they be of anger, fear, or anguish. These emotions are often valid and may stem from being oppressed and discriminated against due to holding certain marginalized identities. However, societally we have been taught that emotions have no place in argumentation, and as a result, emotions have been often dismissed by people in more privileged positions as being irrational and unfounded. Going back to the previous example of the BLM movement, there have been many people who claim that they align themselves with the cause, but qualify that statement with long-winded explanations about how black protesters are too angry and need to protest in a more peaceful way. However, they do not recognize where the anger and the backlash are coming from. In addition, they are caught by what Collins calls “**controlling images**,” which are, in this case, symbols that have been exploited to construct certain manipulative ideas about what black womanhood looks like. These controlling images cause us to create stereotypes, such as that of the angry black woman

unable to take part in rational dialogue, that reinforce and justify oppression. When people in privileged positions focus more on criticizing the emotion behind an oppressed group's discourse rather than trying to understand the underlying reasons for these emotions, they invalidate the oppressed group's epistemology.

### **Developing Praxis in Dealing with Epistemology**

However, it is not enough for us to just recognize the ways that we have been taught to value certain epistemologies over others. Rather, we must combine this reflection with action; this practice of joining critical reflection with action against the system is what philosopher and educator Paolo Freire calls **praxis** in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Thus, in order to resist injustice epistemologically, we must practice praxis and actively work toward elevating different forms of epistemology, especially those which have historically been disregarded. We can do so first by identifying the ways that our consciousnesses are limited by the hegemonic domain of power, which Collins identifies as the socially-accepted ideas and norms that maintain the existing power structures by being so widely normalized that one would find great difficulty in trying to craft alternatives to them. To bring back the example of the BLM movement, the hegemonic domain of power asserts that law enforcement is a just, fair, and honorable system that is necessary in order to keep American society safe. However, we must recognize that there are flaws and alternatives to this system; for example, there exist many societies that function under a very different, non-militarized form of law-keeping. In addition, Dr. Gary Potter of Eastern Kentucky University finds that the modern police organization in the American South can trace its roots back to slave patrols. Thus, once we recognize these hegemonic ideas, we can create our own counter-hegemonic epistemologies as a reversal to that power.

The next step in developing praxis is understanding that different groups of people have different epistemologies that they have created for themselves based on their lived experiences, and that each person's individual epistemology is only a partial truth. Collins calls this "**standpoint theory**," and understanding that people's epistemologies are unique means not that one is more important than another, but rather

that we must layer them in order to develop a more whole understanding of the situation. This, in turn, will give us a more nuanced way of tackling injustice. It is important to continually build upon this need to consider and integrate different standpoints and to recognize that there will always be more standpoints to learn and understand. This constant expansion of thought is what philosopher José Medina calls in his book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, “**kaleidoscopic consciousness.**” Kaleidoscopic consciousness is the final step of developing praxis in order to resist injustice epistemically.

By first reflecting upon the ways we have been socialized to value certain epistemologies over others, we can then put action to this reflection through counter-hegemonic epistemologies, opening up to other epistemological standpoints, and recognizing that there is an endless number of standpoints that we must continue to consider in order to resist injustice. While employing these methods may be difficult, if we each reflect on the ways we unfairly judge and value different epistemologies and work toward learning more, together we can move closer to eradicating injustice.

*Key Terms:*

**Epistemology:** The standards that we use to judge if a claim is knowledge and why we believe what we believe. Collins writes about how epistemology is related to power dynamics in society in which certain epistemologies are considered more legitimate than others.

**Positivism:** A theoretical approach to the social sciences that specifically utilizes scientific evidence to create objective generalizations or truths about the way society operates and function; it places rational, empirical knowledge above all other epistemologies and attempts to remove as much of the human bias/characteristics in the process.

**Controlling images:** This is a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins which refers to images of subordinate groups developed by dominant groups.

Such images are controlling in that they objectify and enforce stereotypes of subordinate groups which justifies their continued inferiority.

**Kaleidoscopic Consciousness:** Medina's elaboration and adaptation of Du Bois' "*double consciousness*": instead of navigating two worldviews in our head, we should strive towards navigating a potentially endless number of worldviews in our head so that we may better understand the position of other oppressed people. The *epistemic friction* produced by these potentially endless worldviews can help us be better knowers of other standpoints and not just ours.

**Praxis:** Freire's concept of praxis involves combining reflection and action in order to transform the world. Neither reflection without action, nor action without reflection, will result in liberation. Thus, true liberation can be accomplished only when action and reflection occur in conjunction with one another.

**Standpoint Theory:** Collins argues that different groups of people will have different lived experiences, which in turn produce their own sets of knowledge. These different sets of knowledge are not more or less valid than one another, but rather their own partial truths. Thus, it is important for groups to consider other groups' standpoints and to expand their own epistemologies based on these other partial truths.

# How do we resist oppression as the oppressed group?

## Introduction

In the previous section, we learned that epistemology plays a fundamental role in resisting oppression. In this section, we will move from resistance at the individual level to resistance at the collective level. Building on what we know about how oppressed individuals can use epistemology to resist oppression, we will now explore the question of how oppressed groups should organize movements of resistance. Since many theorists have thought about what strategies oppressed groups should use, there are many different concepts related to this question. Here we will be focusing on three concepts: first, the concept of **the dialogical model of education**; second, the concept of **obediential power**; third, the concept of **vanguardism**. Looking at these three concepts will help us draw out key principles of organizing movements of resistance.

## I. The Dialogical Model of Education

The dialogical model of education is a concept that comes from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire says that the dialogical model of education is education that is co-intentional. This means that the students and teachers are both active subjects who work together towards the goal of learning. The term “dialogical” captures how working together is done through dialogue. Dialogue activates **problem-posing**, which is critical thinking about the world and how the students and teachers fit into the world. Imagine a school that encourages students and teachers to ask each other questions so that both groups learn from each other. That school operates on the dialogical model of education.

Importantly, Freire opposes the dialogical model of education to what he calls the **banking model of education**. In the banking model of education, the students are passive objects so only the teachers are active subjects. The term “banking” captures how the teachers deposit knowledge into the minds of the students as if the students are containers



to be filled up with knowledge that only the teachers know. Unlike the dialogical model of education, where students and teachers are engaged in problem-posing, the banking model of education cuts students and teachers off from critical thinking altogether. Imagine a school that discourages students from asking questions so that students can only listen to what teachers say. That school operates on the banking model of education.

Which model of education, dialogical or banking, should be used to resist oppression? According to Freire, the answer is the dialogical model of education. This is because the dialogical model of education is fundamentally liberative: education based on dialogue leads to problem-posing and thereby empowers students and teachers with co-created knowledge that can resist oppression. Conversely, the banking model of education is fundamentally oppressive: education based on depositing knowledge into students prevents problem-posing and can therefore easily be used to uphold oppression. Comparing these two models side-by-side, we can see that movements of resistance should organize around education that is dialogical.

## II. Obediential Power

The concept of obediential power comes from Argentine political philosopher Enrique Dussel. To understand this concept, we will have to first look at two other concepts Dussel uses: **potentia** and **potestas**. Potentia is power that is purely potential, power that does not concretely exist in the world. This potential power rests permanently with the people, that is, the individuals that make up a society. Potestas refers to power that has been translated from potentia into actual political power – for example, laws, police officers, and governments. Since every form of political power originates in potentia, potentia is the ultimate and only power.

Obediential power is one of the two types of political power that come into existence from potentia. Dussel defines obediential power as power that is positive and reinforces potentia by obeying the people. An example of obediential power is the power of an elected official who fulfills the promises she makes to her electorate. The other type of power, what Dussel names **fetishized power**, is negative and weakens potentia.

Fetishized power is power that commands by dominating rather than by obeying the people. The power of a corrupt official who steals from public funds is an example of fetishized power.

These two types of political power can be applied to thinking about how movements of oppression should be organized. Like political leaders, the leaders of movements of resistance should use obediential power, not fetishized power. Otherwise, instead of resisting oppression, the leaders are at risk of producing more oppression by dominating the individuals in the movement.

### **III. Vanguardism**

Based on the word “vanguard,” which refers to a group of individuals at the forefront of action, vanguardism is a strategy of resistance whereby a vanguard mobilizes the rest of society for revolution. The idea underlying vanguardism is that the individuals within a society will not be equally revolutionary by the time resistance begins: some will have an advanced understanding of why a revolution is needed; others will not or will only have a partial understanding. What follows from this unequal starting point is that the most revolutionary individuals will have to form a leadership that is tasked with helping others become more revolutionary. This leadership is the vanguard, the crux of vanguardism.

Should movements of resistance use vanguardism? This question does not have a clear and simple answer. Some thinkers embrace vanguardism and some thinkers reject vanguardism. Let us consider both sides of the debate. One thinker who embraces vanguardism is Che Guevara, a Marxist revolutionary leader. In one of his letters, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” Guevara describes the vanguard of the Cuban Revolution as the driving force of revolutionary thinking<sup>78</sup>. He even says that Cuba is the “vanguard nation” which will incite revolution across Latin America<sup>79</sup>. Thus, for Guevara, vanguardism is indispensable to

---

<sup>78</sup> Che Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 10

movements of resistance that aim at revolution. Dussel, who we encountered in the previous section, is one thinker who rejects vanguardism. In his book *Twenty Theses on Politics*, he criticizes vanguardism for being a top-down strategy: a vanguard, he thinks, merely sends orders down to the people. Dussel argues that instead of using vanguardism, movements of resistance should use “rearguard” or bottom-up strategies<sup>80</sup>. Thus, for Dussel, vanguardism should be abandoned.

We can see that this disagreement over whether vanguardism should be used depends on a more fundamental question: does revolutionary momentum come from above, a vanguard or from below, the people? Guevara thinks that revolutionary momentum comes from above. Dussel, however, thinks that revolutionary momentum comes from below. This is because his concept of *potencia*, which we explored in the previous section, holds that power all comes from below.

On the one hand, vanguardism can advance movements of resistance; on the other hand, vanguardism carries the risk of leaders becoming alienated from the people and in the end using fetishized power against the people. To illustrate, consider that while the Cuban Revolution, which Guevara was integral to, did achieve the success of putting Fidel Castro in power, there are reports that Guevara ordered the executions of people he did not know were innocent or guilty.

Along with weighing the advantages and disadvantages of vanguardism, the leaders of movements of resistance should explore alternatives to vanguardism such as the bottom-up strategy that Dussel proposes. He calls this strategy **liberation praxis**. Liberation praxis derives power from below and resists oppression by obeying the people, not sending orders down to the people. Dussel describes how the leaders of a movement based on liberation praxis serve as “a light that illuminates the path constructed, unfolded, and perfected by the people.”

---

<sup>80</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, 98.

## **Conclusion**

The concepts of the dialogical model of education, obediencial power, and vanguardism are important to consider when thinking about the question of how oppressed groups should resist oppression. These three concepts cover the topics of education, power, and the role of the leadership, respectively. Although resisting oppression undoubtedly involves thinking about more topics, these three topics serve as a productive starting point.

### *Key Terms:*

**The dialogical model of education:** education that is co-intentional and liberative, where students and teachers are both active subjects who work together towards the goal of learning through dialogue

**Problem-posing:** a key characteristic of the dialogical model of education, problem-posing is critical thinking about the world and how students and teachers fit into the world

**The banking model of education:** education that inhibits critical thinking and is oppressive, where students are passive objects and only teachers are active subjects

**Vanguardism:** a strategy of resistance whereby a vanguard mobilizes the rest of society for revolution

**Potentia:** power that is purely potential, power that does not concretely exist in the world

**Potestas:** power has been translated from potentia into actual political power

**Obediencial power:** one of the two types of political power that come into existence from potentia, obediencial power is positive and reinforces potentia by obeying the people

**Fetishized power:** the second type of political power that comes into existence from potentia, fetishized power is negative, weakens potentia, and commands by dominating rather than by obeying the people

**Liberation praxis:** a bottom-up strategy of resistance that derives power from below and resists oppression by obeying the people, not sending orders down to the people

# How can oppressors resist oppression?

This chapter of the textbook will suggest ways in which oppressors can resist oppression. First it will unpack the concept of “oppressor”, showing how almost everyone at some point in their lives has been in a relatively oppressing or oppressed position, because of their position within the **matrix of domination**. Second, it will raise three concepts through which oppressors, or those who find themselves in a relatively privileged or oppressing position, can better understand ways to resist oppression: **critical self-inquiry**, **kaleidoscopic consciousness**, and **allyship building**.

## The Matrix of Domination

The world is not a dichotomous place inhabited by clear groups of the “oppressors” and the “oppressed”. Rather, owing to intersections of different class, gender, race, ability, caste, and other social identity factors, the same individual can alternate between being an oppressor and oppressed in different circumstances. Think about it in the form of a **matrix of domination**<sup>81</sup> within a social context where class, gender, race, ability, and other aspects of social identity intersect. For example, a white heterosexual woman is more likely to be oppressed in relation to a white heterosexual man, but more likely to be an oppressor in relation to a black heterosexual woman. In the second case, race identity becomes the rubric by which an individual is oppressed, in contrast with the first case where gender is the criterion of oppression. These criteria vary based on the social positionality of individuals – something that varies based on cultures. Recognizing that we all have at some point of time been in situations where we have been more privileged than others around us, enables us to expand our understanding of an “oppressor” from a fixed identity to something more relational; one may be an oppressor in certain circumstances given their relatively privileged positionality in a particular circumstance.

---

<sup>81</sup> Collins, 2000

Individuals are often blind to the ways in which their behaviors impact others around them. These individuals, as José Medina argues in his book<sup>82</sup>, suffer from **meta blindness**. This is the condition of being blind to how blind one is to their own privilege, and other people's realities and suffering. Individuals who suffer from meta blindness are so insensitive that they rarely acknowledge that others have vastly different perspectives, experiences and realities. For people who hold relative positions of power within the matrix of domination, ignorance of the impact of one's behavior on other people leads to the persistence of their oppressive behaviors.

Therefore, in order for people in positions of privilege to resist oppression, they have to re-educate themselves epistemically, politically and ethically. I suggest that they have to firstly develop a critical consciousness of their meta-blindness. Firstly, they must develop critical self-inquiry of their possibly oppressive behaviors. Once they've done the work of critical self-inquiry, they will be able to enact change in their behaviors and actions. In this section, I raise three ideas: **kaleidoscopic consciousness**, **critical self-inquiry**, and **allyship building**, which can expand the reader's understanding of what is conceptually necessary to resist oppression. In other words, critical self-inquiry fertilizes the soil in which the seeds of empathy for others can be sown, and justice can flourish.

### **Engagement in Critical Self-Inquiry**

Drawing from Freire's critical pedagogy on education, transformation of any individual requires, first and foremost, a shift in thinking. To this end, I suggest that oppressors must engage in the process of **critical self-inquiry**. This is a process of reflecting on our life experiences, and allowing ourselves the opportunity to identify oppressive behaviors we might have engaged in. Without self-identification of unjust actions we might have committed, there can be no change. One way to engage in self inquiry is through engaging in dialogue that draws on personal, lived

---

<sup>82</sup> The epistemology of resistance: gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations.

experiences<sup>83</sup>. Constructive dialogues that are geared towards talking about the various dimensions of oppression enable people to actively engage with the faculties of their mind and heart to critically self-reflect. By cultivating in themselves curiosity, and open and learning minds, oppressors can communicate amongst themselves and members of other groups their motives and strategies of resisting oppression.

### **Development of Kaleidoscopic Consciousness**

**Kaleidoscopic consciousness**, another concept raised by Medina, refers to the expansion of an individual’s consciousness into ways of thinking that allow for acknowledgement and acceptance of differing, and often friction-causing viewpoints and realities. While historically, the oppressed have known to possess **double consciousness**, I suggest that developing kaleidoscopic consciousness is necessary for oppressors to alter their limited understanding of the world. It will motivate oppressors to step out of their privileged understanding of the world and acknowledge and develop sympathy towards the realities of less privileged people. This is key in fighting systemic oppression because no resistance can ever be successful in the long run without validating the oppressed people’s experiences and feelings as real as those of the oppressors, and worthy of attention. For example, if a woman, who belongs to a historically oppressed gender group shares with a man her lived experiences of the discomfort of being cat called, and objectified, only a man who identifies these behaviors as oppressive will be able to treat her experiences as valid, and offer ways of fighting this oppression. Thus, resisting oppression as the oppressor calls for understanding the nuances and multiple viewpoints that different people possess.

### **Building Allies**

---

<sup>83</sup> For more on dialogic education, look at Paulo Freire’s work in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He argues that human nature is dialogic, and communication has a leading role to play in our lives. By engaging in dialogue, humans create and re-create themselves. For oppressors, an act of re-creating their thinking is the first step to fighting oppression that they have engaged in/continue to engage in.



Furthermore, oppressors can resist oppression by becoming allies with members of oppressed groups. Allies are members of a privileged or oppressor group who commit themselves to dismantling any and all forms of privilege that they receive unfair political, economic or social benefits from. Allied behavior means engaging in activities and actions that offer material, ideological or epistemic support to oppressed groups. For example, white individuals fighting racism, or heterosexual men fighting sexism or able-bodied people lending their support to disability movements all reflect on the oppressor groups' intentional efforts to be part of resistance movements. Authentic allied behavior is consistent, overt and devoid of paternalistic<sup>84</sup> sentiments towards oppressed groups. Owing to the collaborative nature of allyship building, people in position of power and privilege can thus, interact with less privileged people, and further their understanding of their life experiences. This engagement will open up broader channels for creative, and innovative thinking to flourish, that can further secure future support and inputs from the oppressor groups in resisting oppression.

Through the ways outlined above, oppressors can join in the fight to resist oppression. It is key to remember that in order to create a more just and oppression-free world, collective resistance is the key. Resistance movements are never successful through the efforts of any one group of people. Transformation takes time, patience, intentional efforts, hope and most of all, an unflinching commitment for a just world – but it's possible, and oppressors can rightfully join the fight too.

*Key Terms:*

**Matrix of domination:** A matrix of domination is a structure within a society that privileges certain aspects of identities, such as race, gender, class, caste, and other social factors, over others, and places them into a power hierarchy. It is referred to as a matrix because these identity

---

<sup>84</sup> I define paternalistic attitudes as those characterized by oppressors offering support to the oppressed group, but at the cost of either constraining their freedom or imposing their(oppressors') own will onto the oppressed.

aspects intersect differently with one another. For more, look at Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.

**Meta blindness:** Medina, in his book describes meta blindness as a cognitive and affective numbing that can be described as insensitivity to insensitivity. It is a form of ignorance that is produced by the epistemic vices of the privileged. In this chapter, I use the term privileged/people in positions of privilege interchangeably with oppressors.

**Double consciousness:** The term was coined by Du Bois in his 1903 work, “The Souls of Black Folk”. Double consciousness describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.

**Kaleidoscopic consciousness:** Medina’s elaboration and adaptation of Du Bois’ “*double consciousness*”: instead of navigating two worldviews in our head, we should strive towards navigating a potentially endless number of worldviews in our head so that we may better understand the position of other oppressed people. The *epistemic friction* produced by these potentially endless worldviews can help us be better knowers of other standpoints and not just ours.

# Should we work within or outside the system?

After being made aware of the oppressive structures that we are complicit in, the usual next step is to ask: so, what can we do? In this chapter we will tackle the action-oriented question: Where am I best placed to make change? Looking at theory about the ideal mode of change affects the paths that we take to get to a better society, and is thus a crucial question to tackle in social justice work.

An important lens we can use to think more about various change-making strategies is the tension between **Reformism** and **Radicalism** (or Revolution).

Reformist change works through small incremental steps rather than large drastic changes. Reform happens through working within the system to tweak what is presently wrong with it. Reformists are interested in modifying objectionable features in a gradualist approach, in a manner that is perceived to be more moderate. An example would be the conscious consumer movement, which is a market-based tactic seeking to change unjust practices (such as animal cruelty, slavery in the supply chain, and corporate pollution) through individual consumption choices.

Radicalism rejects small modifications of the present system to demand the need for structural change. Radical activists advocate the transformation of institutions, practices, and the socio-political superstructures that govern them. This is based on the idea that the structures that have produced these injustices are fundamentally flawed and cannot be reformed. They must instead be destroyed and reconstructed. This mode of change usually works from outside the system, and is interested in an immediate and absolute take-down of the present injustice. The abolition of slavery in the U.S. was one such radical change-making action, in interrupting the deeply racist structure of that time with the radical notion that all human beings deserve equality, and the right to not be treated as property, regardless of skin colour.

Reformists reject radical modes of change-making because they can alienate many demographics, especially the moderate majority. Instead, they advocate a peaceful and gradualist approach. More importantly, they are pragmatists who acknowledge that the present social system, being the one we live in, is very real, and thus the power and legitimacy they afford to their agents could be equally if not more effective in change-making than working from the margins.

Additionally, reformists disavow the confrontation and violence that can at times come with radical change. In seeking diplomacy and compromise, the change they seek to create is more palatable to different actors, from the average citizen to the policy-maker. Having greater buy-in from various stakeholders can facilitate the ease of change-making, and be a more democratic process.

Radical activists, on the other hand, recognise that the structures and institutions we live within are deeply complicit in reproducing many of the injustices that they want to tear down. With the understanding that systems have the power of constricting one's imagination, choices, and actions, how can a system that is presently unjust allow for an agent working within the system to undo the premises of inequality upon which it was built? Real change then comes from radically uprooting the fundamental ideological premises which are the root causes of the various symptomatic injustices we seek to undo.

There is also the argument that liberal reformers can engage with incremental change because they are privileged in not being profoundly oppressed by the system. Radical activists tend to belong to the most marginalised communities, and in this way cannot wait for gradual systemic reform as their survival is being put at stake daily by this very system. To be able to engage with a reformist mode of change is then a privileged position that does not see how oppressed groups do not have the same luxury of patience.

This tension between Reform and Radicalism can manifest in questions about jobs – if I care about making the world a more just place, should I work within formal institutions such as my state government and the United Nations, or should I be working as a radical activist with

grassroots efforts seeking to mobilise people towards revolutionary change? There is no fixed right answer to questions as these. Instead, we suggest three crucial points of consideration.

Firstly, we ought not to understand Reform and Radicalism as dichotomised concepts. They are not necessarily antithetical to each other. An important synthesis would be an approach of complementarity – how can reformist and radical modes of change work together to achieve the end goal of eradicating injustice? An example would be the fight against sexist oppression, where the female suffrage movement was a radical action in demanding a transformation of society into one that recognised the right of women to be citizens as much as men, and has since been complemented by a host of legal reforms such as protecting a woman's right to safe and legal abortion, protecting women from discrimination when pregnant in the workplace, and ensuring equal employment opportunity for women. In the women's liberation movement then, both radical and reformist steps have been used and are being used in the pursuit of gendered justice.

Secondly, the preferred mode of change-making can be highly contextual. While there are staunch proponents of liberal reform and radical action who hold onto their choice of change-making as an ideological principle, there is a middle ground that we can take in identifying what the most strategic change-making mode is for the particular situation.

Finally, it comes down to the individual activist's own unique strengths and considerations. While being as critical and self-reflexive as possible, which mode of change am I best suited to engaging with? Am I comfortable with confrontation and possibly being alienated by the moderate majority for my radical activism? Am I intellectually and emotionally able to work in an institution with an ideology that is fundamentally opposed to mine? Do I believe in compromise? What is my vision of a better society and is there only one way to get there? In sum, there is merit to be found in both reformist and radical modes of change, and we ought not to perceive them in a binary, but rather think critically about the oppression at hand and our individual position to these modes of change-making.

*Key Terms:*

**Reformism:** Reformism refers to a mode of change-making that utilises gradual incremental changes to the present system.

**Radicalism:** Radicalism refers to a revolutionary mode of change-making that calls for the immediate and absolute transformation of present socio-economic structures.

# How can we form coalitions across different oppressed groups?

## Building Coalitional Consciousness

While oppressed groups experience their oppression in different ways, there are many ways these groups need one another to advance their political goals. Furthermore, if we take **intersectionality** seriously, then coalition building can be a way we try to overcome oppression for all. The building of alliances between different groups to work for a shared goal is what we call **coalition building**. The coalition may involve the sharing of material resources (e.g. labour, logistics, finances) and/ or the articulation of a common ideological position. The benefits of coalitions include the increased numerical support, the ability to present a united front against a common oppressor, and the moving towards the possibility of full intersectionality. This section will discuss how groups resisting oppression can develop what Cricket Keating calls a **‘coalitional consciousness’**—that is, “a method of self and collective education toward coalition.”<sup>85</sup>

## Adopting an Expanded Political Consciousness

In order to build coalitions, one must expand their political consciousness beyond a single category of oppression. With Black feminist experiences in mind, Patricia Hill Collins borrows the concept of **‘transversal politics’**<sup>86</sup> from Nira Yuval-Davis. This form of politics asks us to constantly move from one’s particular experience (rooting) and cross over into empathy for others (shifting). Standing at the intersection of multiple oppressions, the Black feminist experience rejects the simple binary of oppressor/oppressed in favour of “*both/and* thinking”<sup>87</sup> where one is simultaneously oppressor and oppressed, ‘privileged’ and

---

<sup>85</sup> Keating, Cricket, “Building Coalitional Consciousness,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 86.

<sup>86</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 245.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 246

‘penalised’. For example, a Black man in the U.S. would be penalised due to racism, but still receives privileges as a man who experiences no misogyny. Transversal politics prevents anti-oppressive groups from seeing themselves as a single group cut off from a larger world of injustice. It provides us a way of understanding how any single social position is “constructed in conjunction with one another.”<sup>88</sup>

This ability to view oppression from multiple viewpoints is also expressed in José Medina’s concept of ‘**kaleidoscopic consciousness**’<sup>89</sup>. To start, this concept is adapted from Du Bois’ notion of ‘**double consciousness**’ that oppressed groups are forced to possess. Black people in the U.S., for example, have to constantly struggle with viewing their Black identity, but through the eyes of an oppressive (White) America which devalues the abilities of Black people. Rather than focus on its negative effects, however, Medina focuses on the positive aspects of having to navigate multiple worlds. To experience two ways of knowing that are not always fully compatible creates what he calls **epistemic friction**. However, this friction helps us cultivate a consciousness that is aware of what one knows and what one is ignorant of, or to be **meta-lucid**. A ‘kaleidoscopic consciousness’ expands from Du Bois’ two viewpoints into potentially unlimited viewpoints, where one acknowledges and welcomes new and unknown perspectives into one’s knowledge of the world. This places us in a better position to understand the world of multiple oppressions that Collins describes.

## Interrogating Identity Politics

Another way of creating a coalitional consciousness is Cohen’s way of interrogating identity categories. For example, Cohen would point out flaws in groups fighting against gender-based oppression who use *woman* to mean only ‘biologically-assigned females’ by pointing out: what about Black women, trans\*, non-binary, or intersex people, etc.? A fixed identity risks excluding certain voices from participating in a

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 247

<sup>89</sup> Medina, José, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201.



movement. Instead of taking one's identity as the starting point (like Collins and Medina have), Cohen rejects identity politics and bases politics on "our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges."<sup>90</sup> This is the difference Cohen sees between identity-based Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans\* (LGBT) movements and Queer politics. Cohen wants the term "queer" to mean not just anti-heterosexual, but to be more inclusive of other ways that sexual minorities may experience oppression, by considering class, gender, ability, nationality and other axes of oppression. One's identity should not limit one's political commitments, which is an advantage of Cohen's more fluid understanding of identity for coalition.

### **Finding Analogous Relations Between Oppressions**

Finally, Enrique Dussel gives us a way of thinking how different oppressed groups can find one common goal which he, borrowing from Ernesto Laclau, calls the '**analogical hegemon**'. For example, women's groups in 1970s El Salvador were fighting gender-based oppression. However, they also understood their common struggle *with* men and other revolutionary parties against a shared enemy that is imperialism and dictatorship. Even though a revolutionary party and a women's group have different *starting* demands, oppressed groups should identify similarities in their struggles and move from different claims towards a shared, universal claim.<sup>91</sup> The concept of 'analogical hegemon' thus says that movements should draw analogies across oppressed groups and come up with a common demand, through dialogue and communication, which "to some degree includes all demands but might [...] prioritize some."<sup>92</sup> All the different goals thus support one prevailing (or hegemonic) and mutually agreed upon goal, and becomes a powerful slogan of unity that can incorporate the work of different anti-oppressive groups.

---

<sup>90</sup> Cohen, Cathy J., "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1997): 458.

<sup>91</sup> Dussel, Enrique, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008): 72.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

## Coalition in Practice

This process of coalition building is seen in the actions of women’s rights advocates in Singapore. As a signatory to the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” (CEDAW), Singapore and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have to submit a regular report to the United Nations (UN) about the state of women’s right.<sup>93</sup> In 2011, NGOs sent in individual reports which the CEDAW Committee found lacking in coordination and coherence. In 2014, women’s groups started to coalition to make a single coherent submission to CEDAW. Their consultative ‘open drafting sessions’ in which members of the public were invited to attend is an example of how dialogue can create a feminist ‘analogical hegemon’. Moreover, the coalition was committed to representing various intersections of women’s oppression including domestic workers, LBT women, Muslim women, and other marginalised women. This allowed them to view problems through multiple viewpoints and develop the ‘kaleidoscopic consciousness’ necessary for a truly informed knowledge of women’s oppression in Singapore. The coalition report submitted by 13 NGOs in 2017 demonstrates their commitment to intersectionality and ‘transversal politics’—receiving praise from the CEDAW committee.

Coalitions are important ways of increasing support for a specific cause and require careful building of a coalitional consciousness. Through dialogue, empathy, and intersectional thinking, we can unite together to present a stronger front for anti-oppressive work.

---

<sup>93</sup> “FAQs: CEDAW Coalition Report 2017,” *Many Voices, One Movement*: 2017 Singapore CEDAW Coalition. Last modified October 11, 2017, <https://sgcedawcoalition.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/faqs-cedaw-coalition-report-2017/>.

*Key Terms:*

**Coalition building:** the building of alliances between different groups to work for a shared; in civil society terms: an alliance between two or more groups working towards a specific anti-oppressive cause or social change

**Coalitional Consciousness:** the attitudes and mind-sets oppressed groups need to develop through self and collective education in order to orient themselves towards the possibility of coalition building; often a longer-term project of allied values and understandings, rather than short-term, single-issue alliances.

**Transversal Politics:** as compared to taking one's personal experience to make universal claims about a specific issue, transversal politics emphasises that one's politics needs to be based in our specific lived experience, but also requires us to empathise with other oppressed groups in their differences, and *their* specific lived experience. Yuval-Davis calls this a process of rooting and shifting, where one needs to constantly move from the personal to the other in order to prevent universalising understandings of oppression.

**Epistemic Friction:** Medina's term for when two conflicting or incompatible worldviews are held by a single person, so much so that it causes the 'friction' between the two points of view create beneficial moments to consider different ways of knowing, producing *meta-lucidity*.

**Meta-Lucidity:** For Medina, this is a virtuous quality cultivated by *epistemic friction*, a case where the oppressed groups are more likely to display a quality of knowing what they know, and knowing what they are ignorant of due to their having to navigate the dominant worldview and their particular worldview.

**Kaleidoscopic Consciousness:** Medina's elaboration and adaptation of Du Bois' "*double consciousness*": instead of navigating two worldviews in our head, we should strive towards navigating a potentially endless number of worldviews in our head so that we may better understand the position of other oppressed people. The *epistemic friction* produced by

these potentially endless worldviews can help us be better knowers of other standpoint's and not just ours.

**Double Consciousness:** Du Bois' term for when an oppressed group has to navigate both their own worldview, but also through the dominant oppressor's worldview. Du Bois primarily uses this term negatively to express the internal conflict in the minds of the oppressed when forced to measure their own self-worth against the yardstick of a dominant group's.

**Analogical Hegemon:** Dussel's adaptation of Laclau's phrase. When groups with different claims and demands come together through dialogue and communication to articulate a single, prevailing claim against an anti-oppressive force. This is built on the belief that oppressed groups can draw analogies from each other and work together at a collective level higher than at the level of their individual demands.

## Unit 4: How does a world free of oppression look like?

# Personal Visions

A world in which we understand what is meant when Judith Butler says, **“We are worldless without one another.”** To be able to do *anything*—eat, read, cook, sleep, etc.—we require one another. We require institutions, resources, friends, people who we intimately know and people in their own right whom we may never see in this lifetime. This means we have obligations to each other; it means we have gratitude to pay; it means no one is *strictly* a self-made person. To build a world without oppression, we need each other.

---

*“There is no ideal world for you to wait around for. The world is always just what it is now, and it's up to you how you respond to it.”* **Isaac Marion.**

---

Ideally, an oppression-free world would have communication, understanding, and acceptance between people regardless of their differences. I always thought that the reason for many of the conflicts in the world is the disconnect between groups of people. The whole us vs them mentality. I wish that we can see all of our differences as just differences without putting negative associations. We are all different and that's what makes us beautiful. As cheesy as it sounds, I really do think love can heal, mend, and ultimately be a solution to undermining oppression and other forms of injustice – whether it be from self-love to love that inspires change to happen. If everyone could realize that we (humans, animals, earth, etc.) all make up one fluid, amorphous, and intangible spirit (Of earth? Of living?), perhaps we can all begin to love each other equally and coexist with one another.

---

A world free of oppression is one in which unity is based on empathy rather than similarity, in which we acknowledge and value each other's

experiences, where we question structures that do not make space for those experiences. A world free of oppression is radically different from our world today. A world free of oppression is something we must keep reaching for.

---

A world where animals are happy and no one feels oppressed.

---

If people could just listen, and I mean really *listen*; to the problems, struggles, and concerns of everyone, the world might just be a better place.

---

In my world without oppression, there will be no Collins, Hooks, or Medinas as much as there will be no Hitlers, Trumps, or Weinstains. “Oppression and Injustice” will be a history class. Because I hope that we will no longer need theories to teach us how to love and treat each other with respect. We will no longer need theories to guide praxis because we can rely on something more fundamental and intrinsic such as love to guide us. Theoretical concepts such as “intersectionality” and “meta-lucidity” will become practical norms that are of second nature to us.

---

To me, an oppression-free world would look like an ahistorical world. I truly believe that oppression is the result of historical contingencies. In other words, the fact that a community X is more oppressed than a community Y is not due to chance, but rather it is the result of the legacy of previous conflicts, previous widely acknowledged ideas and previous customs. An oppression-free world is a world where everything has been settled.

---

True empathy, properly understood, is the necessary and sufficient condition of an oppression-free world. This entails stepping into the shoes of everyone as they come.

---

A world free of oppression: A world free of oppression is a world free of selfishness. It sounds impossible, but who said a world with no oppression is easy to achieve? Selfishness is not just using others for one's own benefit. Selfishness is inaction, feigned ignorance. When we see a problem, we don't determine its importance on whether it affects us or not. We don't wait to feel the problem to work towards solving it. We try to solve it once we know about it. We don't do it because we think other people will do it too. We do it because we know it's right.

---

It is one where all living beings understand that life itself is the fundamental denominator. *Why bother standing against another when life is just contained in a moment?*

---

When I think of an oppression-free world, I can't help but picture this pastel kaleidoscope of sunbeams and ice cream and people playing in the park. The more I think about it, though, the more I feel that an oppression-free world might still feel kind of the same. The world wouldn't magically turn into an over-exposed Polaroid from the 70s, and I'd probably still be sitting here, typing on my laptop with a to-do list looming over my head. And I think that's fine. Of course, life would be easier, and aside from the little bubble of my experience, an oppression-free world would mean less pain. I can't go into what that means without writing a full-length manifesto, but that's just it. Less pain. Less fear. More support and love and freedom, and all those sappy wonderful words. When I think of an oppression-free world, I flip-flop between that beautifully blurry image of sunshine and rainbows, and something that looks like my view right now, only without all the exploitation and



injustice, but even that's hard to imagine. Hopefully, that's only because it'll be so much better than anything I can come up with.

---

A world free of oppression is one in which people listen openly, believe generously, give wholeheartedly, and love fully. It is a world in which we give as much care to each other as we do to ourselves, and vice versa. Perhaps it is a world only fully realizable in dreams, but then again, aren't we all dreamers?

---

Where people love, and allow themselves to be loved.  
Where I see you in me, and me in you.  
Where humanity prevails.  
Where hope lives.

# Glossary of Terms

## Unit 1: How does oppression work?

### **Controlling images**

This is a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins which refers to images of subordinate groups developed by dominant groups. Such images are controlling in that they objectify and enforce stereotypes of subordinate groups which justifies their continued inferiority.

### **Dialogue**

A conversation between two people of equal status.

### **Epistemology**

The standards that we use to judge if a claim is knowledge and why we believe what we believe. Collins writes about how epistemology is related to power dynamics in society in which certain epistemologies are considered more legitimate than others.

### **Ethic of personal accountability**

The notion that it is essential for individuals to bear full responsibility for what they claim.

### **Ethics of care**

The notion that emotions can be used to indicate that a person believes in her claim.

### **Internalized oppression**

This term refers to the process by which oppressed people come to accept and internalize certain beliefs and stereotypes about their own group. They might also begin to act out such stereotypes which might further harm those in the group.

### **Lived experience**

The notion that individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts on, are more believable than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences.

### **Positivism**

A theoretical approach to the social sciences that specifically utilizes scientific evidence to create objective generalizations or truths about the way society operates and function; it places rational, empirical knowledge above all other epistemologies and attempts to remove as much of the human bias/characteristics in the process.

### **Power as dominating**

A conceptualisation of power in which its central purpose and expression is to dominate others for one's own benefit.

### **Power as creative and life-affirming**

A conceptualisation of power in which its central purpose and expression is to uplift others.

### **Intersectionality**

The interconnected nature of social categorizations of an individual or group, such as but not limited to ability, race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, which create overlapping, interlinked, and interdependent oppression and privilege.

### **Reform vs Revolution**

Reformistic tactics and movements are those that make only incremental change, or benefit the most privileged in an existing system to the exclusion or detriment of the most marginalized. Conversely, revolutionary movements aim to overhaul entire social systems and produce radically different outcomes. For example, gender-inclusive hiring practices in top companies may be reformist for they benefit only upper-class women (i.e. those that have climbed the career ladder to earn the highest salaries.) These practices, however, endorse capitalistic structures which exploit poor and working class women. A truly revolutionary tactic, some would argue, necessitates abandoning capitalism altogether in favour of socialism or communism.

### **Third world women**

This term refers to women from developing or less developed region including but not limited to certain areas in Africa, Asia, and South America. Feminism often fail to take into account the concerns of third world women that include under-development and imperialism. White or Western (or first world) feminists often look upon third world women as subjugated beings that need “saving” without taking the effort to learn what forms of assistance is required. First world feminists impose their model of equality without consider under cultural specificities or problems of women in the third world.

### **Women of color**

At face value, this term refers to female persons of color. The political term “women of color” refers to a group of female persons of color that called for greater focus on the diverse experiences of non-White women. It surfaced in the violence against women movement in the late seventies with the goal of unifying women experiencing multiple layers of marginalization including gender, race, and ethnicity.

## Unit 2: What is oppression?

### **Ableism**

Discrimination and social prejudice against individuals with physical, sensory, learning, developmental, and intellectual disabilities in favor of those who are non-disabled.

### **African Socialism**

A system of sharing and support in traditional African society, based on the belief that a society should be like a family

### **Bisexual/Bisexuality**

A bisexual person is somebody who is attracted to two or more genders. The prefix “bi” is usually understood as “two”, and so, a common understanding of bisexuality is a person who is attracted to both men and women, though such a binary understanding of bisexuality is not accepted or used by everybody with this label.

### **Capitalism**

An economic system characterised by the private ownership of property and a free market

### **Colonialism**

This is the policy of a nation seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or territories, generally with the aim of exploiting them to the benefit of the colonizing country and “helping” the colonies modernize in terms defined by the colonizers, especially in economics, religion and health.

### **Compulsory able-bodiedness**

The insistence that what is moral and desirable within neoliberal social context of late capitalism are necessarily nondisabled and heteronormative.

### **Disability**

Disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a society which takes little or no account of people who have physical, sensory, and mental impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the social activities with the rest of the population.

### **Disability Studies**

An interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field that challenges ableism by promoting full and equal participation of people with disabilities in society and generating theoretical and practical knowledge about disability; it educates and develops discourse about disability (i.e. how it is represented and perceived in society) among scholars, advocates, and other people concerned with the issues of people with disabilities

### **Drag Artist**

A drag artist is a person who performs, and while during performances, dress and behave in hyper-feminine and/or hyper-masculine manners that may or may not conform to the stereotypes about the performer’s gender. For example, a drag queen is somebody whose performance exaggerates femininity, and a drag king is somebody whose performance exaggerates masculinity. However, despite the hyper-gendered performances, many drag artists blur the lines between femininity and masculinity, playing around with stereotypes and notions of gender.

## **Gender**

The gender of a person is their state of identifying with some gender identity, such as “woman”, “non-binary”, or “man”. It is distinct from sex, as gender does not have to coincide with certain physical or biological traits.

## **Gender Binary**

The gender binary is a concept arguing that there are only two genders: women, and men, and does not include the possibilities of other genders that do not conform to those standards.

## **Gender Presentation**

One’s gender presentation is the way they “perform” or “present” their gender in the way they behave, the clothes they wear, etc.

## **Glass Ceiling Effect**

The “glass ceiling” is a metaphor used to portray the pervasive resistance to a demographic group from reaching beyond a certain level in the social hierarchy.

## **Heteronormativity/Heteronormative**

“Heteronormativity” is the worldview that argues and promotes heterosexuality as the only normal sexual orientation.

## **Homophobia**

Homophobia is the discrimination of and prejudice against homosexuality. However, it can more widely be used to describe behaviours and mindsets that discriminate against anybody who is not heterosexual, or certain traits that are not considered “heterosexual”. For example, a person who thinks it is disgusting when their bisexual friend is attracted to somebody of the same gender, can be considered to have displayed homophobic behaviour, even though the subject of that discrimination is not strictly homosexual, but bisexual.

## **Impairment**

Practical restriction due to limitations in the physical, mental, and/or sensory functioning of specific organs, limbs, or mechanisms in the body.

**Intersex**

Intersex people are born with different variations of sex characteristics (including hormones, genitals, chromosomes, etc.) that do not conform neatly into the biological and medical definitions of “female” and “male” that are prevalent in society at the time.

**Intersex Genital Mutilation**

IGM is a type of surgery where the genitals of an intersex person are surgically reconstructed to conform to the dominant ideals of what female or male genitals look like at the time, and is often unnecessary and dangerous.

**LGBT**

An acronym that stands for “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual”, and “transgender”. Another common variations are LGBTQIA+, which also includes “queer” or “questioning”, “intersex”, and “agender” or “ally”, with the “+” indicating more queer identities. It is often used as a catch-all to refer to the queer community.

**Matrix of domination**

As defined by Patricia Hill Collins, this is the overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society. Any specific matrix of domination has (1) a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, e.g., race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age; and (2) a particular organization of its domains of power, e.g., structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

**Medical Model of Disability**

The traditional theory for understanding disability that regard disability as an intrinsic characteristic of the person and as a medical problem that requires medical treatment prescribed by credible health professionals to be cured/treated.

**Microaggression**

Microaggression refers to the causal degradation between individuals in their interpersonal day-to-day interactions.

**Misogyny**

An ingrained prejudice against women.

**Non-binary**

A person who is non-binary identifies as a gender that is not strictly “woman” or “man”, either somewhere in between those two genders, or somewhere outside of the spectrum entirely.

**Non-disabled**

Someone who does not identify as having a disability; this term is preferred in opposed to the term “able-bodied” because the latter implies that all people living with disabilities lack bodies that are capable or abilities to use their bodies well.

**People of Colour**

Used primarily in the United States to describe any person who is not white. The term encompasses all non-white peoples, emphasizing common experiences of systemic racism.

**Prejudice**

Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

**People with Disability/Disabilities**

Preferred terminology for those people who identify as having a disability; this term uses people-first language instead of identity-first language in order to avoid defining people in terms of their impairment.

**Queer/Queerness**

A queer person is one whose sexuality and/or gender does not conform to the heteronormative and transmisogynistic standards of dominant society. Queerness is the state of being queer.

**Queerphobia**

Like homophobia, queerphobia is the discrimination of and prejudice against queer people and queerness.

**Sexuality**



“Sexuality” refers to a person’s sexual orientation or preferences, or could also refer more generally to a person’s capacity for sexual feelings and attraction. When discussing queer identities, the term most likely refers to the former rather than the latter.

### **Slavery**

Broadly, slavery refers to any system which allows individuals to own, buy and sell other individuals and treat them as property. In this chapter, it is used in reference to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which saw the buying, selling of transporting of captured Africans to the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries.

### **Social Model of Disability**

A model of understanding disability that counters the traditional medical model by distinguishing impairment from disability and identifying disability as a disadvantage that stems from the social attitudes and institutional norms that discriminate against people with disabilities, not from the disability itself.

### **Social realities (Chapter on Racism)**

The ways in which we navigate around the various social, economic and political structures in society with respect to our visible and invisible identities, thereby influencing not only how we are seen and treated by others, but also how we see and treat ourselves.

### **Transfeminine**

A person who is transfeminine is somebody who was assigned male at birth, but identifies more closely with femininity than masculinity. Another way to understand transfeminine identity is to say that a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) defines closer towards the feminine side of the gender spectrum. However, there is some dispute as to whether gender should be described as a linear spectrum, with masculinity and femininity on either end. This is because such a spectrum seems to uphold the notions of a perfect masculinity and perfect femininity, and does not take into account overlaps of feminine and masculine traits that occur simultaneously or the possibility of defining one’s gender outside of such a system.

### **Transgender**

A transgender person is one whose gender identity does not conform to the gender that they were assigned at birth.

### **Transmasculine**

A person who is transmasculine is somebody who was **assigned female at birth (AFAB)**, but identifies more closely with femininity than masculinity. Another way to understand transfeminine identity is to say that an AFAB person defines closer towards the masculine side of the gender spectrum. However, there is some dispute as to whether gender should be described as a linear spectrum, with masculinity and femininity on either end. This is because such a spectrum seems to uphold the notions of a perfect masculinity and perfect femininity, and does not take into account overlaps of feminine and masculine traits that occur simultaneously or the possibility of defining one's gender outside of such a system.

### **Transmisogyny**

Transmisogyny is similar to misogyny, but is particularly directed towards trans people, especially transfeminine people, who were assigned male at birth, but identify more closely with femininity than masculinity.

### **Transphobia**

The discrimination of and prejudice against transgender people and more generally, any notion of gender that does not adhere to the prevailing norms of society and the notion of a female-male binary.

### **Visible and Invisible Identities**

These refer to social markers which influence our social realities. Example of visible identities are race and gender and invisible identities are sexual orientation and social class. Important to note is that some invisible identities may be made visible through certain actions associated with a certain identity.

## Unit 3: How do we Resist Oppression?

**Allies**

Allies are members of a privileged or oppressor group who commit themselves to dismantling any and all forms of privilege that they receive unfair political, economic or social benefits from. Allies can also be from the oppressed group who agree to work together to resist oppression.

**Analogical Hegemon**

Dussel's adaptation of Laclau's phrase. When groups with different claims and demands come together through dialogue and communication to articulate a single, prevailing claim against an anti-oppressive force. This is built on the belief that oppressed groups can draw analogies from each other and work together at a collective level higher than at the level of their individual demands.

**Coalition building**

the building of alliances between different groups to work for a shared; in civil society terms: an alliance between two or more groups working towards a specific anti-oppressive cause or social change

**Coalitional Consciousness**

the attitudes and mind-sets oppressed groups need to develop through self and collective education in order to orient themselves towards the possibility of coalition building; often a longer-term project of allied values and understandings, rather than short-term, single-issue alliances.

**Double Consciousness**

Du Bois' term for when an oppressed group has to navigate both their own worldview, but also through the dominant oppressor's worldview. Du Bois primarily uses this term negatively to express the internal conflict in the minds of the oppressed when forced to measure their own self-worth against the yardstick of a dominant group's.

**Epistemic Friction**

Medina's term for when two conflicting or incompatible worldviews are held by a single person, so much so that it causes the 'friction' between the two points of view create beneficial moments to consider different ways of knowing, producing *meta-lucidity*. This expression refers to the

clash between two conflicting perspectives namely how a subject sees him-self and how it is ignored and/or distorted by the others.

### **Kaleidoscopic Consciousness**

Medina's elaboration and adaptation of Du Bois' "*double consciousness*": instead of navigating two worldviews in our head, we should strive towards navigating a potentially endless number of worldviews in our head so that we may better understand the position of other oppressed people. The *epistemic friction* produced by these potentially endless worldviews can help us be better knowers of other standpoints and not just ours.

### **Matrix of domination**

The **matrix of domination** or **matrix** of oppression is a sociological paradigm that explains issues of oppression that deal with race, class, and gender, which, though recognized as different social classifications, are all interconnected. The matrix privileges certain aspects of combined identities over others and creates hierarchy in intersectionalities.

### **Meta-Lucidity**

For Medina, this is a virtuous quality cultivated by *epistemic friction*, a case where the oppressed groups are more likely to display a quality of knowing what they know, and knowing what they are ignorant of due to their having to navigate the dominant worldview and their particular worldview.

### **Praxis**

Freire's concept of praxis involves combining reflection and action in order to transform the world. Neither reflection without action, nor action without reflection, will result in liberation. Thus, true liberation can be accomplished only when action and reflection occur in conjunction with one another.

### **Reformism**

Reformism refers to a mode of change-making that utilises gradual incremental changes to the present system.

### **Radicalism**

Radicalism refers to a revolutionary mode of change-making that calls for the immediate and absolute transformation of present socio-economic structures.

### **Standpoint Theory**

Collins argues that different groups of people will have different lived experiences, which in turn produce their own sets of knowledge. These different sets of knowledge are not more or less valid than one another, but rather their own partial truths. Thus, it is important for groups to consider other groups' standpoints and to expand their own epistemologies based on these other partial truths.

### **Transversal Politics**

as compared to taking one's personal experience to make universal claims about a specific issue, transversal politics emphasises that one's politics needs to be based in our specific lived experience, but also requires us to empathise with other oppressed groups in their differences, and *their* specific lived experience. Yuval-Davis calls this a process of rooting and shifting, where one needs to constantly move from the personal to the other in order to prevent universalising understandings of oppression.

# References

1. "Capitalism." Encyclopedia Britannica.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/capitalism>.
2. "FAQs: CEDAW Coalition Report 2017." *Many Voices, One Movement*: 2017 Singapore CEDAW Coalition. Last modified October 11, 2017.  
<https://sgcedawcoalition.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/faqs-cedaw-coalition-report-2017/>.
3. Brown, Keah. "Saying Stephen Hawking Is "Free" From His Wheelchair Is Ableist." *Teen Vogue*, March 14, 2018.  
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/stephen-hawking-free-from-his-wheelchair-ableist>.
4. Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-465.
5. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
6. Correll, Shelley J., Stephen Benard, and In Paik. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297-339. doi:10.1086/511799.
7. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2018). doi:10.18061/dsq.v36i3.
8. Dussel, Enrique. *Twenty Theses on Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
9. Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). The Five Sexes, Revisited. *The Sciences* , 40 (4), 18-23.
10. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York and London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.
11. Friedman, Carli, and Aleksa L. Owen. "Defining Disability: Understandings of and Attitudes Towards Ableism and Disability." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2017). doi:10.18061/dsq.v37i1.5061

12. Goering, Sara. "Rethinking Disability: The Social Model of Disability and Chronic Disease." *Current Reviews in Musculoskeletal Medicine* 8, no. 2 (2015): 134-38. doi:10.1007/s12178-015-9273-z.
13. Hehir, Thomas. "Confronting Ableism." *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 5 (2007): 8-14.
14. Hill Collins, Patricia. "US Black Feminism in Transnational Context." in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 227-49, Rev. 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.
15. hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2015. First published 1984 by South End Press (Brooklyn).
16. Hosking, David L. "Critical Disability Theory." Presented at Disability Studies Conference, Lancaster University, UK.
17. Human Rights Campaign. (2018, January 9). Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2018. Retrieved from Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2018>
18. Intersex Society of North America. (2005, March 3). Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) medical risks . Retrieved from Intersex Society of North America, [http://www.isna.org/faq/medical\\_risks/cah](http://www.isna.org/faq/medical_risks/cah)
19. Keating, Cricket. "Building Coalitional Consciousness." *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 86-103.
20. Lee, Pearl. "Former HCI Students Want School to Suspend Sexuality Education Workshop." *The Straits Times*. January 19, 2016. Accessed April 22, 2018. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/former-hci-students-want-school-to-suspend-sexuality-education-workshop>.
21. Lees, P. (2018, January 22). We're in the midst of an epidemic of violence against trans people. Retrieved from *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/22/epidemic-violence-transgender-people-experienced-stonewall>
22. Lewis, Talila A. "Honoring Arnaldo Rios-Soto & Charles Kinsey: Achieving Liberation Through Disability Solidarity."

- TALILA A. LEWIS. July 22, 2016. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/achieving-liberation-through-disability-solidarity>.
23. McBride, S. (2017, November 17). HRC & Trans People of Color Coalition Release Report on Violence Against the Transgender Community. Retrieved from Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/blog/hrc-trans-people-of-color-coalition-release-report-on-violence-against-the>
  24. McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 88-99. 2nd ed. Routledge.
  25. Medina, José. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
  26. Nzewgwu, Nkiru Uwechia, "The Conclave: A Dialogic Search for Equality." in *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, 157- 97. Ithaca: SUNY Press, 2006.
  27. Paris, Natalie. "'Sexism' in the Sky: How Do Airlines Get Away with It?" *The Telegraph*. February 04, 2016. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/Sexism-in-the-sky-how-do-airlines-get-away-with-it/>.
  28. Potter, Gary. "The History of Policing in the United States, Part 1 | Police Studies Online." Eastern Kentucky University Police Studies Online, June 25, 2013. <http://plsonline.eku.edu/insidelook/history-policing-united-states-part-1>.
  29. Rivera, S. (2002). *Queens in Exile, The Forgotten Ones*. In J. Nestle, C. Howell, & R. A. Wilchins, *GenderQueer: voices from beyond the sexual binary* (pp. 67-85). Los Angeles, California, USA: Alyson Books.
  30. Women's Charter (2009 Rev. Ed.). s. 69.



# List of Student Contributors

Alison Huynh Wong  
Anthea Julia Chua  
Chong Ren Jie  
Daniel Wong  
Dianne Araral  
Do Youn Lee  
Fay Lee  
Jane Zhang  
Lim Chu Hsien  
Lim Jun Rong  
Pertina Seah  
Pragya Sethi  
Shawn Hoo  
Shina Chua  
Tan Heng Yeng  
Victoire Bret  
Waihuini Njoroge