

## INTERROGATING CRITIQUES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Feminists face many problems that we know about all too well. We know that we live in a thoroughly misogynistic society. All around the world women still experience gender as an axis of exclusion, domination, and subordination. We know that sexism is a crucible where the logics of racism, coloniality, class domination, anti-immigrant nativism, homophobia, transphobia, and many other cruelties are learned and legitimated. Phobias and fantasies that are enabled and encouraged by exaggerated notions of gender difference make inequality and injustice appear to be natural, necessary, and inevitable. Feminists are well aware that the institutions that shape women's lives are structured in dominance—in the economy and the educational system, in reproductive health care and housing, in the images circulated by advertising and entertainment.

But feminists also have some problems that we know all too little about. I argue that the very terrains of feminist analysis, activism, and argument are infused with neoliberal social pedagogies, with cultural training programs that normalize structures of power and hierarchy. The articles and books that we read, the classes that we take and teach, and the activist organizations that we join and support often reproduce and reinforce the categories and conditions that feminism has been committed to contesting. Feminism is a collective oppositional social movement and a critical intellectual practice, but it is also an entity that holds power inside institutions that parcel out individual rewards and promote interpersonal competition.

Within its core realms of interest and expertise, feminism has long been aware of how exclusion and subordination can become encoded in and transmitted by ordinary activities and practices. Feminist writings have justifiably chronicled a long history of overt misogyny, of socially sanctioned assaults on women's bodies, denials of access to property and voting, and exclusion from employment and education. Yet feminists have also recognized that these overt exclusions have been enabled, augmented, and exacerbated by microsocial practices honed through cultural training programs promoting the devaluation of women in many seemingly small ways—through the identification of men as watchers and women as those being watched in the cinematic gaze (Mulvey 1975; Johnston 1976); through the conventions of language use and protocols about who gets to speak and when (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990); and through the assumptions encoded in therapeutic advice, counseling, and self-help literature (Buhle 1998; Mitchell 1974; Samuels 1992). Like the hegemonic sexism that feminists find to pervade so many aspects of social life, hegemonic racism does not require a conscious intention or an originating action, but rather becomes absorbed organically through many different cultural practices, unless it is challenged by a clear and fully conscious oppositional culture and politics.

Feminists are well aware of the power that is deployed against us. Many of our analyses and arguments identify the causes and consequences of the power imbalances that pervade the gendered structures of society. Yet we have been less critical of—even oblivious to—the power that we ourselves wield in our roles as gatekeepers and managers of an academic field, as writers, reviewers, editors, and interlocutors, as embodied subjects unified by a common field of inquiry but deeply divided by differences in social experiences, understandings, and aspirations.

Recognizing that things are wrong in the world does not lead automatically to rectifying them. Knowing that we work within sexist institutions does not clarify what we need to do to negotiate the challenges of working within them honestly and honorably. Most important from my perspective—and most central to the evidence, ideas, and arguments advanced in this book—is that merely recognizing and condemning gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized power does not protect us from unwittingly deploying terms and tools that are saturated with power and structured in dominance. The result is that feminism too often betrays its social justice imperatives not because of bad faith, ill will, or incompetence, but because it fails to acknowledge how often the work we do at quotidian scenes of argument unwittingly reflects dominant ideologies and epistemologies that should be deliberately countered.

This book uses tools of critical and poststructuralist discourse analysis to examine the disturbing racial politics running through more than two

decades of widely cited white feminist commentary on the intellectual production of women of color, specifically white feminist critiques of intersectionality, an interdisciplinary concept developed by Black feminists and other women of color. The argumentative strategies and rhetorics of these white feminist critiques, I argue, are replete with “powerblind” discursive practices that reinforce racial hierarchies and undermine feminism’s stated commitment to social justice.

In this chapter, I explain the project of intersectionality, identify the problem of powerblind discourses prevalent in white critiques of it, situate powerblindness at the scene of argument as part of the shared social agreement about what counts as acceptable feminist academic argument, and consider challenges that feminist argumentation might take up to move away from powerblind discourses. I conclude the chapter by identifying the premises of my argument and the plan for the book.

## THE PROJECT OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The radical critique posed by intersectional thinking—originating in attempts by women of color feminists to fuse gender justice with racial justice—gained traction in feminist academic discourses particularly from the 1970s to the 1990s, when Black women as well as other women of color were actively intervening in scholarly discussions. The generators of intersectional thinking argue that entrenched social, legal, and academic practices of framing social categories as given, isolated, fixed, and static are pivotal to the reproduction of social dominance. They contend that categories such as gender, race, and class are not stable and discrete but, rather, variable and changing constellations that are *relational*, *interconnected*, *mutually constituted*, and *simultaneous* (see, for example, Bambara 1970; Carby 1982; P. Collins 1986, 1991; Combahee River Collective 1983; Crenshaw 1989; A. Davis 1981; Dill 1988; Giddings 1984; Higginbotham 1983, 1985; Mullings 1986; Rollins 1985; B. Smith 1983a). Other women of color in the United States developed related arguments (for example, Anzaldúa 1987; Glenn 1985, 2002; Hurtado 1989; Lowe 1991, 1996; Matsuda 1991; Sandoval 1991, 2000), as did scholars in Britain (for example, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). (For overviews of the development and debates about intersectionality, see Carastathis 2016; Collins and Bilge 2016; Dhmoon 2011; Hancock 2016; May 2014, 2015.)

Intersectional thinking emerged from the theorizing of women of color as a tool against structural subordination, an analytic to challenge structural inequality and call for institutional transformation. It is a political and analytic concept; a sensibility or disposition; a heuristic for thinking in supple and strategic ways about social categories, relations of power, and the complexities

of sameness/difference in terms of conceptions of *both/and* rather than *either/or* (see P. Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

Intersectional analysis reveals how single-axis theories of subordination inscribed in law but also utilized in self-defense by aggrieved groups can obscure shifting and multiple axes of power. As a conceptual framework that focuses attention on the degree to which all identities are multidimensional, intersectionality is a nexus of complex arguments about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nation, hierarchy, power, control, and value. Intersectional analysis—particularly the work of legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1991)—has served as a catalyst for widespread use of intersectionality as a political and analytic tool. It has served as a major theoretical resource in the development of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw 2010, 2011c), in feminist studies (McCall 2005), in an increasing number of academic disciplines, in discussions of social policy,<sup>1</sup> and in popular activism.<sup>2</sup> Intersectionality has become one of the most cited and deployed frames for speaking about all social identities and power.

An extraordinary body of work has provided original and generative deployments of intersectional thinking to demonstrate how *politics defines identities* rather than *identities defining politics*. Drawing on arguments about history, difference, flexibility, fluidity, specificity, and multiplicity, scholars argue that gender- and race-based antisubordination struggles do not flow organically from shared physical features but rather emerge in struggles that seek to imbue complex and complicated embodied identities with dynamic political meanings (see, for example, Barvosa 2008; Blackwell 2011; Cho 2009; Cohen 1997; Connolly and Patel 1997; Crenshaw 1992, 2011a; A. Davis 1997; Fregoso 2003; Fujino 2005; Hawkesworth 2003; Hernández 2010; James 1996; S. Lee 2008; Lowe 1996; Maira 2000; Maxwell 2006; McCall 2001; Reddy 2011; Roberts 2012; Rodríguez 2003; Rose 2008, 2013; Sandoval 2000; Shah 2001; A. Smith 2006; Tapia 2011; Valdes and Cho 2011; Wilkins 2012).

Intersectionality has been proposed not as an overarching grand theory but as a politically grounded mid-level theory for antisubordination and social change: in the terms that Stuart Hall used in describing the value of Antonio Gramsci's theories, a mid-level theory "complexifies" existing theories and problems by connecting large concepts to specific situations (1986, 5), exemplifying Gramsci's argument for a middle-range, protracted "war of position" to be waged across many different sites (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of Gramsci's war of position).

As a mid-level theory, intersectionality is appropriate to the vexed and vexing nature of its objects of study and the need to operate across many different sites: there are always racisms, always sexism, but never the same over time and space. Racial, sexual, and gender projects are both local and global,

so neither scholarship nor activism benefits from having to choose between parochial microsocial descriptions or overly general disembodied claims of universality. Different social arenas require different arguments: legal, literary, sociological, cultural, and ethnic studies need different forms of theorizing because they have different goals, methods, and objects of analysis (see, for example, P. Collins 1989, 1991; Crenshaw 1989; Lowe 1991; Sandoval 1991). Rather than focusing on ideal and abstract schematic formulations about what identities should be, “mid-level theorizing” attends to concrete struggles over power and social structures, over what identities are now and what they are capable of becoming. The situated but transferrable epistemology and ontology of intersectional women of color provide a revealing lens for theorizing society as a whole, enabled by, but not limited to, their experiences. Some critics claim intersectional thinking is merely the “parochial” and “embodied” concern of women of color. But since all views—including the view of the white middle-class heterosexual woman—are partial perspectives, the intersectional theorizing of women of color is already fit for universality. Though the point is usually ignored in white feminist critiques of intersectionality, mid-level theorizing is particularly suited to the tasks of feminist analysis.

Speaking to the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1971, Fannie Lou Hamer asked her listeners to refuse any vision of racial justice that did not include gender justice and to reject any vision of gender justice that did not include racial justice (C. Lee 2000). The originators of intersectional analysis in academic writing and teaching echoed and elaborated on this vision. Nearly all of the core writings that established intersectionality as an activist and academic imperative emphasized its practical utility and programmatic commitment to confront and contest the ways in which sexism undermines antiracism and racism undermines antisexism. Yet, as I demonstrate throughout this book, this is not the intersectionality that has survived and thrived within feminism. A set of tools designed to address intersecting vectors of power has often been watered down into an enterprise aimed largely at ruminating about overlapping aspects of individual identity. The emphasis on the parameters of individual identity in feminist critiques of intersectionality works to occlude the workings of power.

## THE PROBLEM OF PERVASIVE POWERBLINDNESS

The provocation of intersectional thinking challenged white feminism’s dominant emphasis on gender as the primary axis or site of oppression and its emphasis on white women as the primary representatives of feminism, positions encouraging a concomitant suppression of the heterogeneity of race, class, and sexuality. Intersectional analysis provoked white feminism to go

beyond a liberal acknowledgment of “difference” to examine *which differences make a difference*. Requiring the reformulation of dominant feminist theories of subjectivity, power, social structures, and subordination, intersectionality has proven to be a crucial tool for theorizing about subordination and for developing antisubordination arguments.

Despite its importance as a tool for antisubordination, intersectionality has also provoked a plethora of powerblind discursive practices that I delineate in this book. It is among the most misread, mischaracterized, and misunderstood concepts in scholarship about social justice. Few theories are as consistently misinterpreted.<sup>3</sup> Critics routinely misrepresent the history and arguments of intersectional thinking, treat it as a unitary entity rather than an analytic tool used across a range of disciplines, distort its arguments, engage in “presentist” analytics, reduce its radical critique of power to desires for “identity” and “inclusion,” and offer a “de-politicized” or “de-radicalized” intersectionality as an asset for dominant disciplinary discourses. Critics tend to approach conceptions of intersectionality carelessly, through metacommentary and complaint, through recommendations to bring its radical critique under control by advocating recourse to specific and often deeply conservative disciplinary methods—without acknowledging that such methods may have long been criticized for their service to dominant discourses.<sup>4</sup> Critics repeatedly present arguments that have already been made by intersectional scholars as if they were the critic’s own original, new, significant claim (May 2014, 2015).

A long line of critical commentary has consistently misrepresented the intersectional theorizing of women of color. As I demonstrate in this book, this extensive body of widely referenced commentary, articles, and books—often cited, taught, and imitated—accuses intersectionality of creating the very categories and social relations that it exposes and contests. This work portrays intersectionality as fixed when it is fluid and flexible. It relies on an extensive set of uninterrogated argumentative conventions and writing practices that subordinate the generative intellectual labor of women of color on the basis of casual claims of white feminist critics. Again and again, these powerblind critics declare the ideas of the feminists of color who developed intersectionality to be simplistic and merely experiential, while even the most superficial ideas of white scholars are treated as sophisticated and theoretical. In effect, many white scholars position themselves as “rescuing” the concept of intersectionality from the inadequate thinking of the women of color who developed it.

These positions might seem plausible to those who read them because powerblind critiques routinely rely on reviews of the research literature that are dramatically disproportionate with regard to race and scope. Powerblind critiques often buttress their own condemnations by citing a surfeit of previ-

ous critiques, the overwhelming majority by white feminists; the result is often not an analysis of intersectionality but simply a compilation of the negative things that white feminists have said about intersectionality. A few intersectional theorists of color are usually cited and discussed—though generally not analyzed—to ground the critiques of intersectionality, with particular emphasis on a few old texts, rather than close examination of contemporary arguments. The tendency to treat intersectionality as a unitary entity—rather than a cluster of flexible analytic tools used for various disciplinary and political purposes—encourages critics to position a comment of any intersectional scholar as representative of all of intersectional thinking. As a result, declaring deficient any particular argument of an intersectional scholar is treated as tantamount to proving “intersectionality” deficient. The apparent credibility of this argumentative structure is contrived through restricting its citations. Virtually never cited in such powerblind critiques of intersectionality are the myriad generative and insightful intersectional analyses connecting power, politics, race, gender, sexuality, and other categories written over the last several decades notably (but not solely) by scholars of color. Because this scholarship is rendered invisible, utterly inaccurate claims about the nature of intersectionality’s limitations (“cannot be used to study experience,” “fails to deal with concrete individuals”) may seem tenable to uninformed readers.

Such powerblind discourses have been established as the prevailing and preferred mode for white feminist critiques of intersectionality. Critiques especially fail to acknowledge adequately intersectionality’s metaphoricality and its disposition toward the *both/and* rather than the *either/or*. Instead they resort to judgments structured through conceptual binaries that have long been criticized by feminists for oversimplifying the complex, dialogic, flexible, and even contradictory relations inherent to arguments about antisubordination. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, critics constantly return to the terms of tired tropes: “strains of particularism versus universalism, personal narrative versus grand theory, identity-based versus structural, static versus dynamic, parochial versus cosmopolitan, underdeveloped versus sophisticated, old versus new, race versus class, US versus Europe, and so on” (2011b, 222–223).

Many contemporary scholars who want to draw on intersectional thinking seem to believe that they must make submissive gestures to distance themselves from commonplace representations of an “imaginary intersectionality” framed as deeply flawed. I argue that these submissive distancing gestures are a result of the distorted terms of debate established by more than two decades of powerblind white feminist critiques, reiterated, re-enforced, and continued into the present by their systematic repetition and problematic politics of citation. For many years these critiques have largely gone unchallenged; pub-

lished rebuttals such as this book have appeared only in recent years (see, for example, Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013, 2014; Carbado 2013; Cho 2013; B. Cooper 2015; May 2014, 2015; Tomlinson 2013a, 2013b). The constant repetition of such rhetorics distorts feminist studies' goals of social justice. It encourages feminist scholars to assume that their task should be *to condemn, reform, and appropriate intersectionality*, rather than *to foster intersectionality's ability to critique subordination*.

Intersectionality—perhaps feminism's most celebrated icon of inclusion—may strike some readers as an odd point of entry for an analysis of the currents of dominant racial discourses sedimented within white feminism. Yet as I show in these chapters, feminism's inclusion of the women of color who developed intersectionality has been of a significantly conditional kind, more a stripping of assets and an evisceration of radical critique than incorporation and development of a body of thought created by women of color. The incessant negativity of white feminist critiques reveals dominant feminism's resistance to identifying and interrogating its covert allegiances—and its continuing insistence on placing the interests of white women at the center of feminist analysis, argument, and activism.

Deployment of racially dominant discursive strategies by white women is not new, though many contemporary white feminists may not have noticed the ways that conventional powerblind academic rhetorics reinscribe racial hierarchy at the center of feminist discourse. The rhetorics examined in this book are a contemporary instantiation of a long historical pattern in which generative social critiques by Black women have been suppressed, ignored, and discounted. Work by intersectional analysts and other Black scholars often mentions historical figures whose arguments were ignored—for example, Sojourner Truth, Maria W. Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell (see, for example, the critiques of discursive racism in Carby 1982; P. Collins 1991; Combahee River Collective 1983; Cooper 1892; Giddings 1984; Green 2007; Guy-Sheftall 1995; King 1988; C. Lee 2000; Lorde 1984; Lugones and Spelman 1983; May 2012, 2015; Richardson 1987; B. Smith 1983a; Terrell 2005; F. Williams 1987). Thus contemporary feminist academic discourse replicates the very dynamic of being ignored and silenced that has characterized white reception of the intersectional thinking of Black women since its inception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see particularly May 2015, and also Bambara 1970; Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995).

The history of racialized critiques and their remarkable resurgence in the past two decades in feminist scholarship through powerblind discourses and problematic practices of citation offer women of color an inclusion in femi-

nism—but of a subordinate kind. Women of color routinely find themselves implicated in discussions of intersectionality characterized by incessantly repeated falsehoods and denigration. They are expected to ignore more than two decades of white feminist argument systematically demeaning the ideas, the scholarship, the scholars, and the social formations that created intersectionality. They are expected to overlook the fact that for many years, despite their manifest problems of evidence and argument, these white feminist critiques have been valorized and seldom subjected to criticism by other white scholars. The result, I argue, is a picture of a neoliberal white feminism that may well be all but unrecognizable to most white feminists, but which is all too familiar to women of color.

Powerblindness is an unarticulated ideological commitment that structures the social imagination and circulates widely within feminist reading and writing practices. Through powerblind discourses, authors and activists present themselves as unaware of their own racial power, as independent of and isolated from the currents of racial power that permeate their societies and the institutional matrices in which they work. Powerblind rhetorics are used in feminist studies to erase racial specificity, to make white authors and readers feel that they are color-blind, to proclaim white innocence and register white injury, to devalue the research of women of color, to hoard academic resources (honors, awards, and recognition) for white scholars who purport to supersede the work of women of color, and—significantly—to disguise the neoliberal stripping of intellectual assets from women of color.

Such powerblind strategies are widespread and readily visible in white feminist critiques—“hidden in plain sight”—because white feminist scholars have not trained themselves to *read* intersectionally, to consider the intersectional *effects* created by the reinscription of social dominance at the scene of feminist argument. In this book I bring to light some of the specific strategies through which powerblindness is implemented. These include tactics of social amnesia, incorporation, appropriation, erasure, ventriloquizing, arguing with straw persons, adopting imaginary allies, treating inclusion as a one-way street, neoliberal asset-stripping, rhetorics of rejection and replacement, errors of attribution, chains of fallacious citations, decontextualizing metaphors, deploying the “mark of the plural,” creating a gulf between the critic and the criticized, “fixing” the “essential” nature of women of color, rewriting the role of inclusiveness in the history of feminism, providing alibis for dominant white feminists, dissolving the concept of intersectionality into the history of white feminism, and reinscribing white feminism as the center of the field’s social analysis. As I argue more fully in Chapter 9, these strategies do not operate separately or additively; their iteration, repetition, and citational legacy

work together to create an “Epistemic Machine”—a discursive machine for invalidating the knowledge of intersectional scholars of color.

How do we explain the persistence and pervasive presence of patently false claims and racially condescending formulations in peer-reviewed feminist scholarship? Why do researchers from a field founded to advance gendered inclusion succumb to practices that promote racial exclusion? What is it about the hierarchies and rewards of academic and activist feminism that lead feminists claiming concern for social justice to craft and embrace a surfeit of arguments that appear blind to their own deployment of racial power?

Just as schools of fish take for granted the waters in which they swim, our schools of thought in academic and activist circles rarely allow us to recognize that we are swimming in a sea of neoliberal beliefs, incentives, structures, and cultural frames. Neoliberalism elevates individual experiences and aspirations over collective obligations and responsibilities. It promotes relentless competition for recognition and reward. It encourages people to strip assets from others and to view deeply political problems as susceptible to only apolitical, personal, or technical solutions. These powerblind white feminist misrepresentations of intersectionality imbibe the ideology of neoliberalism through practices of asset-stripping that delegitimize the intellectual production of women of color while effecting appropriation of the concept of intersectionality for management and ownership by an unmarked white feminism. Equally significant is the use of strategies that serve to subdue and depoliticize intersectionality’s originating radical critique of structural power, often reducing the concept to little more than liberal acknowledgment of diverse personal identities. These strategies work to create a concept of intersectionality that is safe for power.

Powerblind strategies emerge in part from professional pressures, reward structures, and credentialing mechanisms that feminists do not sufficiently interrogate. Scholars are eager to publish. Displacing and supplanting previous knowledge conforms to the structures of professional reward. Scholars may exaggerate their criticisms of work by others to draw on the prestige of the appearance of novelty and innovation in ways that are destructive rather than constructive, competitive rather than contributive. Editorial decisions at the site of publication play an important role here. As Lauren Berlant argues, “To decide to publish something is to confirm that it has made a case for its worthiness as knowledge” (2007, 671). Journals and presses may fail to see that what appears to be a “lively” or “controversial” article in fact replicates widespread and systematic misrepresentations of intersectional thinking. Academic journals are part of a training “pipeline” that includes graduate student cultures, presentations at professional meetings, and prestige hierarchies that spread word-of-mouth approval and disapproval. These sites function

to produce what counts as “critique” and what defines the safest and most satisfying ways to deliver it.

Other aspects of our academic training may produce the unwitting use of powerblind strategies. Graduate students learn to rely on reading practices that attack and disparage texts rather than analyze them. Unarticulated fears and social dangers pervade academic culture. The practices of consumption and connoisseurship that saturate social relations in this society teach people that it is dangerous and humiliating to be out of date and out of fashion. Consequently, expressing *dislikes* may appear safer than expressing *likes*, a preference that David Riesman long ago connected to consumption practices. In a study of consumers of popular music, he found that “enthusiasm would seem to be a greater social danger than negativism: The fear is to be caught liking what the others have decided not to like” (1950, 369). Scholars do not leave these practices behind when they leave graduate school. As a result, they may deploy inadequate modes of argument that do not contribute positively to feminist knowledge production focused on antisubordination.

Academic training may encourage powerblind strategies when specific disciplinary discourses are deployed to restrain, dismiss, and appropriate radical critique. The interdisciplinary, boundary-crossing focus of feminist studies as a whole exists in tension with the disciplinary training of many feminist scholars. As this book demonstrates, arguments in some disciplines may be so focused on how intersectionality meets disciplinary interests that they ignore or treat disrespectfully its significance for other disciplines. These arguments may frame intersectionality in narrow, discipline-bound ways, as if the entire value of the concept rests on its ability to meet strictures proposed as appropriate for a specific discipline. The ways of knowing characterizing a specific discipline are elevated to stand in for all feminist ways of knowing. Because discipline-bound strategies are taken for granted within disciplinary discourses, they can serve as potent tools of dominance, infusing the reading situation with strategies of racialized subordination that go unremarked because they are authorized by tradition and convention. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes, “Patriarchal whiteness surreptitiously works to support white feminists being racially disembodied as their thinking, knowing, and writing becomes more consistent with Western Male epistemology and disciplines. Patriarchal whiteness deludes women into thinking their epistemology is unaffected by this process because of ‘academic freedom’ and their positioning as subject/knowers” (2000, 351).

The managerial training that silently accompanies our disciplinary training may also unwittingly encourage the use of powerblind strategies. Because universities are class-based institutions that privilege managerial perspectives, critics of prevailing power relations trained in these academies can come to see

their proper role as “managing” the opposition. Dominant power is secured through discursive practices at the scene of argument throughout the academy as well as through control of economic, political, and legal institutions. Dominant ideas are learned and legitimated through what Ranajit Guha calls the “prose of counter-insurgency,” a shared social discourse that positions critics of the social order as complainers or “insurgents”—as illegitimate rebels against the sedimented authority of hegemonic ideas and actions (1988). At the scene of academic argument, the prose of counterinsurgency relies on taken-for-granted ways of framing issues that are complicit with subordination and exploitation. It contains what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as a “materials memory” inside language that assumes inequality is natural and normal and that delegitimizes arguments on behalf of social justice (cited in Terdiman 1993, 45). In scholarship, it elevates authority over equity, equilibrium over equality. Within this framework, gendered, raced, and nonnormatively sexed agonists are discredited in advance, their arguments dismissed before they even begin to speak (for “discredited in advance,” see C. Mills 2007). Without rigorous interrogation, feminists in the U.S. and European academies who are racially dominant may frame racialized others as “insurgents” whose arguments should be dismissed or contained.

These political and intellectual problems are not resolved or overcome by intersectionality’s current “success”—its centrality as a concept for contemporary feminism. The audit culture that preceded and now in a different way pervades the neoliberal academy exerts its power in perverse ways. Academic debates often focus on criticizing and “uncrowning” popular theories. In fact, there are numerous critiques attempting to “uncrown,” “dethrone,” discredit, confuse, and contradict conceptions of intersectionality, with no analysis of how jettisoning intersectional analysis would destabilize feminist cross-racial alliances and undermine feminist knowledge production concerned with race. There is also an enduring temporal dimension to these problems. The architecture of academic argument ensures continuing citation in the present of problematic critiques of the past. Because feminism has not yet even fully acknowledged, much less come to grips with its immersion in neoliberalism and its own discursive deployment of power—because it is “blind” to how racialized power undergirds its system of critique—it unwittingly reinforces the logic of domination that it purports to protest.

White feminists have obtained control over a whole area in the academy that has been of great value. Yet consistent with neoliberal notions of property and power, they have labored to maintain their privileged access to those resources, to proclaim their gendered inclusion in the academy as a victory for all, while zealously appropriating for themselves the right to determine the degree, nature, and pace of racial inclusion. This leads to the bizarre spectacle

of white feminists belittling and demeaning the very intersectional ideas they proclaim as their own.

This view of feminism as a site where white privilege is produced and protected will likely come as a surprise to many feminists. As a field of inquiry and activism, feminism has long claimed commitments to social justice. To its credit, many of its key thinkers have honestly and honorably recognized feminism's organic affinities with antiracist ideas and actions. Both sexism and racism are inscribed on the body, exaggerating small differences in appearance to create large differences in treatment and opportunity. Overt declarations of racist intent are rarely present in feminist discourse. Yet under the terms of neoliberal social organization, economics, and culture, statements of racist intent are not needed to produce outcomes with racist effects. Neoliberal racism generally includes persistent denials and disavowals of racism, yet racial stratification still permeates nearly every area of human endeavor. Feminist social justice that includes a commitment to antiracism can become possible only through full awareness and presence of mind about the need to identify, analyze, and oppose the insidious ways in which feminism—as well as the larger society—contains practices that produce what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva aptly names “racism without racists” (2003).

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SCENE OF ARGUMENT

It is the performative and social nature of feminist academic argument that creates the conditions of possibility for powerblind discourses that undermine feminism's commitment to social justice. While often criticizing larger cultural discourses, feminist scholars tend to view their own practices of reading and writing as conventional and transparent, frequently failing to acknowledge and examine how the arguments and scenes they construct are *always already* situated within fields of power and *always already* participate in forms of social domination. Framing academic and political discussions in commonsense ways treats writing conventions as parts of a neutral technology to be deployed or evaluated in isolation from their conditions of production, the situations of speakers, and the effects of social power. Yet as this book demonstrates, feminist arguments can absorb and convey uninterrogated and deeply hierarchical models of textuality, argument, authorship, and evidence.

Louis Althusser argues that concrete individuals become constituted as “subjects” through ideology, but the most powerful ideological influences do not come to us in the form of ideological pronouncements (1971). Such pronouncements would be visible, controversial, and refutable. Instead, he argues, the most powerful ideologies exist in “apparatuses,” in practices, and these

practices are always material. Reading, writing, and arguing are material social practices laced with ideologies of legitimacy and propriety so powerful and pervasive that we presuppose their value rather than examining their effects. If, as I argue, feminists become “arguing subjects” through material practices that they have not sufficiently examined, then we need to transform the terms of reading and writing to take responsibility for the ways that feminist discourses at the scene of argument can function as technologies of dominant power.

Examining how academic feminists become “arguing subjects” reveals that discourses at the scene of argument are part of what *constitutes* an academic feminist public (see Warner 2002, 16, on constituting publics). The texts we read and write—and our reading and writing of them—are material social practices that shape *what counts as* academic feminism. Feminist scholarship establishes itself not merely by circulation of prominent ideas but also by production of the most mundane conventions of argument, reiterated as commonplaces in texts that become widely read and cited. Under such circumstances, problematic conventional textual practices can go unremarked while serving to subdue radical praxis. Whether or not we desire it to be so, feminist academic discourses are nodes in a network of communications structured in dominance. Like other discourses, feminist academic discourses interpellate, “hail,” or call out to us *as if* we are certain kinds of feminist subjects, their efficacy based on their citation of certain prior and “authoritative” practices (see Butler 1997). These discourses have indirect effects whether they are intended for us or not, whether we receive them or not, whether we resist them or not. Through this barrage of hailing, we come to understand what is “obvious,” what “goes without saying,” what counts as “coherent.” Dominant readings are reinforced through their ideological intelligibility, even if a reader is critical (see S. Mills 1995). They subject and subjectify. Feminist knowledge practices and critical performances at the scene of argument serve as “socializing pedagogies” (Wiegman 2010, 83). In effect, feminism is *produced* through discourse.

We cannot escape being interpellated by the effects of the scene of argument. Our practices of writing proceed through patterned acts of argumentation, fully immersed in the social history of language, deploying words and forms that have been “completely taken over,” as Bakhtin argues, “shot through with intentions and accents” (1981, 293). Feminists cannot escape using conventional patterns of language, claims, and arguments, but we can insist on looking more closely at the scene of argument in order to determine how conventionalized argumentative structures serve us badly when they gain purchase as convincing moves, yet undermine radical critique.

The long-standing pervasive practices of unacknowledged feminist powerblindness that appear in white critiques of intersectionality reveal the scene of argument to be a much more important site for feminist praxis than is often acknowledged, and one that is all too clearly neglected. The scene of academic argument is a discursive site, a textual stage, a platform for social contestation, a location for the rhetorical enactment of power (see also Tomlinson 2010; Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019). The scene of argument is a social site where academic feminism is produced: articulated, modeled, learned, and legitimated. At the scene of argument we can examine what kinds of claims are being made, how and why these claims are justified, to whom they are attributed, how they are passed on and adopted by others, and how they serve to influence larger arenas of discussion. It is at the scene of argument that we can examine how the powerblind relationship between intersectionality and its critics has been formed, how it has *emerged from* the practical forms of articulation, exchange, and consumption that are already in place within the institutions we inhabit. The scene of argument reveals a great deal about who we are as feminist scholars: how we see the purpose of our arguments, our assumptions about the efficacy of conventional scholarly textual strategies, and the nature of the “metadiscursive regimes” that authorize what it is acceptable or desirable to argue in the field of feminist studies.

Metadiscursive regimes contain widespread, largely unarticulated ideologies of language, argument, and discourse. They shape and constrain the discursive practices that appear at the scene of argument. Academic argument is not an individual enterprise but a collaborative socially shared activity created with common tools wielded by a wide range of writers, reviewers, and readers. Academic authors seeking to intervene in ongoing scholarly conversations shape their arguments according to their perceptions of feminist studies’ socially shared standards of research. They deploy argumentative and rhetorical conventions considered acceptable and desirable in feminist studies. Manuscripts undergo procedures of peer review in which reviewers and editors of journals and presses offer advice—again based on standards that are socially shared—advice that may drastically change the claims and evidence marshaled in particular texts. Once published, texts are read, cited, and commented on by other feminist scholars, extending the conversation and production of knowledge taking place through feminist argument. Under such circumstances, the powerblind argumentative decisions I examine in this book cannot be framed as individual issues—merely matters of private choice and personal style. They must be seen as evidence of socially shared understandings of the proper nature of feminist academic discourse enacted by a phalanx of scholars—colleagues, editors, reviewers, anthologizers, citers,

readers—evaluating, sanctioning, and promoting particular texts and arguments according to the frameworks of feminist metadiscursive regimes.

Metadiscursive regimes frame our ways of thinking about broader notions of social power. Discursive technologies of power encourage affiliation with dominant discourses through complex means of identification and repudiation. General societal and disciplinary power relations give utterances friendly to prevailing power relations an overdetermined “reasonableness” while rendering most oppositional arguments automatically suspect. Even in feminist academic discourses, conventional social or disciplinary criticisms infused with such overdetermined “reasonableness” can serve to circumscribe and control the much-needed unruliness of oppositional critique. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs argue that metadiscursive regimes are a foundational creation of modernity, formulating rules about the proper boundaries and relationships among language, tradition, science, and society, and providing “a basis for what could be thought, discussed, and enacted by modern subjects” (2003, 51). For example, the metadiscursive regimes of modernity we have inherited contain and constrain the imagination in ways that underpin feminist powerblindness: they valorize elite voices as “authoritative” while trivializing voices of the Other as “authentic” but illegitimate as sources of knowledge (312). If contemporary critical projects that frame themselves as opposing structures of inequality unwittingly deploy the metadiscursive regimes of modernity without interrogating their ideological grounding, efforts “to challenge racial and other structures of inequality will be sapped of their interpretive and political efficacy from the outset” (306). By sustaining privileged modes of thinking, uninterrogated metadiscursive regimes place dominant power, hierarchy, and exploitation at the heart of feminist argument.

Acknowledging the potent role of dominant metadiscursive regimes in shaping what is considered acceptable and desirable in feminist academic argument enables our understanding of powerblindness. Powerblindness is not an individual problem of politeness or etiquette but a problem of ideology, of politics and ethics. Michel Foucault argues that power is a mobile part of every relation; the rationality and logic behind power relations are not directed and controlled by specific individuals or groups but, rather, operate through *strategies* that can exercise power or counter it (1980a). Thus, I emphasize, the texts I examine in this book are *examples* but not the *target* of my analysis. The texts function as representative conventional uses of argument appearing in works that have been vetted by peers—edited, published, anthologized, and cited as authoritative by a chain of subsequent scholars. A host of feminist scholars has approved these texts according to shared standards of feminist research. My *target* here is exactly those shared standards and their complicity

in reproducing unacknowledged and uninterrogated metadiscursive regimes of modernity and disciplinarity that feminist scholars both inherit and forge, regimes that, I argue, lead them to reinscribe social and racial hierarchies at the scene of feminist argument and thereby weaken the precision and productivity of feminist thought.

The ready acceptance and repetition of powerblind strategies can be overcome if feminist argumentation is no longer treated as a neutral technology but reframed as a site of political praxis requiring at least the same level of reflexivity as feminist theorizing and methodology. Powerblindness is fostered when feminist discourses address intersectionality *nonintersectionally*. Approaching feminist discourses intersectionally can prompt us to interrogate whether conventional discursive strategies and taken-for-granted ways of thinking about academic argumentation produce intersectional effects.