

Book Review

Intersectional violence, resistance and the radical political power of hope

Lethal Intersections: Race, Gender, and Violence, by Patricia Hill Collins, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2024, 304pp., £55.00 (hardback), £17.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781509553150, 9781509553167, 9781509553174

Patricia Hill Collins' *Lethal Intersections: Race, Gender, and Violence* (Collins 2024) is a book about violence, resistance, and hope. Drawing from a rich selection of cases engendered by the lethal interplays of systems of power based mainly on race, gender, sexuality, nation, class, and age, the book examines the tension between structures and agency, domination and resistance, the imposition of premature and excess deaths on particular social groups versus the power of ordinary people to get together to pursue, and sometimes achieve, justice. Its sources are popular cultural productions – non-academic books (non-fiction, fiction, memoirs), films, documentaries, and site-specific art performances. Whilst the US sets the stage for many of the cases discussed in the book, its scope is global, including cases spanning each of the world's continents. The book is the third in Collins' trilogy on intersectionality. Where *Intersectionality* (Collins and Bilge 2020 [2016]) addresses the emergence, growth, and contours of the concept of intersectionality and *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Collins 2019) examines its theoretical dimensions, *Lethal Intersections* illustrates the methodological purchase of intersectionality as an analytics of power and resistance, showing its ability to unveil the entangled roots and effects of inequality in different times and places, as well as the seeds and deeds of people's collective resistance to these.

Theoretically, the book introduces the notion of 'lethal intersections' to describe 'sites of political domination' where multiple systems of power intersect, engendering conditions 'where death, or the threat of death, is evident' and may be lethal 'to those who are harmed by social inequality' (p. 3). They are sites where the violence manifesting in the present is embedded in and shaped by and through histories of enslavement, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and similar systems of oppression (p. 44).

Violence is thus the defining feature of a lethal intersection, and the definition of violence adopted in the book is expansive, multi-scalar and situated, reflecting its nature as constitutive of the world that we have inherited, create and inhabit, as well as of ourselves. Violence encompasses both the invisible, systemic violence shaping 'the rules and regulations of society' and the visible acts of violence of which they are expression (p. 10) – their interplay informing the cases featured throughout the book. Using the 'domains of power framework' (Collins 2000), the book shows how violence shapes everyday social relations (the interpersonal level), social institutions (the structural level), societal rules and regulations (the disciplinary level), and ideas (the cultural level). These very four domains are also helpful to think through some of the 'political possibilities for defending, resisting, or remaining indifferent to intersectional violence and the social injustice that it upholds' (p. 13), all the while attesting to the synergistic quality of the relationship between intersectional violence and

resistance (p. 25; p. 244). The definition of violence is also situated and perspectival – as in standpoint theory (Collins 2000). Deployment of this term may reflect normative definitions put forth by ‘those who cause, engage in, and/or benefit from violence,’ or minoritized epistemologies developed by ‘those who experience it’ (p. 12). Depending on social location, national memorials may thus well appear celebratory or threatening (Chapter 4), in the same way as attachments to lethal objects, such as guns, may reflect culturally specific (i.e., settler colonial) ways to pursue self-definition or annihilation (Chapter 5).

Structure of the book

Lethal Intersections consists of five chapters bracketed by an Introduction that lays out the book’s purpose, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and chapter-by-chapter outline.

Chapter 1, ‘Lethal intersections and violence,’ examines cases of visible and invisible violence enacted at the intersection of race and gender in and through a range of physical and political sites – the home, the prison, the street, and the body. At its core lie three instances of lethal intersections: the case of Ms Dhu, an Aboriginal woman who died in police custody in Australia; the case of Philando Castile, an African American man shot and killed by the police during a traffic stop in the US, and the case of Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans woman and key figure of trans activism in New York City who died under suspicious circumstances. These cases function as windows opening to the interplay of the historically sedimented and intersecting structures of oppression, which engender the conditions for the premature and excess deaths recorded in the communities they are part of. Similarly, they offer opportunities to showcase how people bearing witness to a lethal intersection – family members, friends, allies – or embodying one themselves, like trans women claiming their right to live in ‘an honest body’ (Jordan 2002), resist against the invisibilization and dismissal of the violence enacted upon them, their loved ones, and their communities.

Chapter 2, ‘Violence and the power of ideas,’ explores how ideas shape political domination and resistance to it. It opens with the case of Marielle Franco, a Black feminist human rights activist and city councillor of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who was killed for her courageous intersectional politics, including her choice to live visibly and vocally as a Black lesbian mother. The chapter continues with an examination of the role of popular culture in reproducing systems of domination, particularly based on race, spanning the British Empire, segregationism, and Nazism up to contemporary far-right political projects. To these, it juxtaposes the voices of the survivors of the violence enacted upon them – whether in Nazi concentration camps, contemporary Australian immigration detention camps, or in contexts where girls’ right to education is contested – and of the many messengers killed for their political ideas, but whose ideas lived on, nonetheless. Overall, the chapter puts forth the importance of cultivating ‘critical literacy’ (Freire 1970) skills to see through the routine concealment and mystification of systemic intersectional violence and to speak truth to power – because silence will not protect those onto whom it is exercised (Lorde 1984).

Chapter 3, 'Violence and national identity,' focuses on the intertwining of participatory democracy, unequal citizenship, and violence in the US. It opens with a description of the process through which artists and activists successfully struggled to remove a confederate memorial, the statue of General Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, in the wake of the new political climate catalysed by the killing of George Floyd by a police officer. Follows an in-depth discussion of gun violence in the US, which is explored both in its historical and cultural roots and in its pernicious effects – high rates of violent deaths among minoritized social groups and widespread unsafety. The chapter concludes with the examination of three cases illuminating the fraught relationship between violence and present-day American national identity, as well as the power of ordinary citizens to challenge and re-envision it from below through participatory democracy practices. These are the struggle against the public supply of water containing harmfully high lead levels in Flint, Michigan; the lawsuits leveraged by the parents of the children killed in the mass shooting taking place in the Sandy Hook elementary school, Connecticut, against a media figure spreading disinformation, and the sustained mass mobilization in Standing Rock against the construction of oil pipelines passing through Indigenous ancestral land.

Chapter 4, 'Invisible violence,' centres on the intersectional violence shaping the lives of children and young people whom, in different times and places, society has deemed illegitimate, unworthy, or in other ways disposable and exploitable, and on the role of memory in resisting against the normalization of such violence. The chapter's opening case tells the story of the discovery of an unmarked mass grave of babies in Tuam, Ireland, which led to the uncovering of the network of oppressive and exploitative institutions within which impoverished women and girls birthing children outside of wedlock were often confined. From here, it departs to examine the interplay of colonialism, racism, and capitalism in differentially shaping children's life chances and opportunities, past and present, based on class and race. In particular, the chapter looks at the experiences of poor white children in industrializing Britain, Black children born under slavery, segregationism and their afterlives in the US, Indigenous children in white settler societies subjected to assimilationist regimes, up to the present-day exploitation of children in a global context. The chapter further points to the role that women have historically played in resisting this intersectional violence. In conclusion, it hints at the scale of the restorative justice work lying ahead of us at a time when official state apologies for slavery and colonialism remain at best partial, selective, and overall, conveniently partaking in the performance of an artificial temporal caesura with a deplorable past to avoid accounting for its enduring grip on the present.

Chapter 5, 'Resisting intersectional violence,' pivots on the analysis of three cases of collective organizing by women and young people living in war zones, who have coalesced to resist the intersectional violence affecting themselves, their families, and their communities. The first case is set in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country engulfed in a decades-long conflict in which rape is widely used as a weapon of war (Maedl 2011), and where a group of women has come together to establish the City of Joy – a residential sanctuary offering survivors the space and time to start rebuilding their lives by turning 'pain into power,' as per the centre's motto (p. 209). The second case centres on the lifelong activism of two women mobilizing against the deadly long-term effects of dioxin, which was used as a weapon of war by the American army in Vietnam and as a

defoliant on US soil. The third and final case is constituted by the coalition built by youth survivors of a mass shooting in their high school, the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, Florida, resulting in their successful organization of 'the March for Our Lives', a youth-led mass protest against gun violence which took place in Washington, DC.

Conclusions

Lethal Intersections does not have a concluding chapter. Indeed, the book is intended as 'a beginning point not an endpoint of analysis,' since 'grappling with the complexities of intersectional violence requires collective effort' (p. 19). Throughout, the book masterfully balances the breadth of its scope with context-specificity, demonstrating the versatility and broad applicability of intersectionality as an analytics of power, domination, and resistance.

The book's key take-away message is that since '[i]ntersectional violence and resistance to it are deeply interconnected,' achieving transformational change lies in the realm of the possible (p. 244). As a reader, encountering Collins' book at a time of escalating and potentially genocidal violence against Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip (International Court of Justice 2024) and widespread repression of dissent in many European and North American universities (European Association of Social Anthropologists 2023; Butler 2023), I found strength in its emphasis on the power of collective organizing and coalitional politics from below, and in its capacity to cultivate readers' dispositions towards the radical political power of hope.

The book will be an essential read for scholars doing research within and across the social sciences on the roots and effects of systemic and intersectional violence in the US and in a global context; graduate and postgraduate Sociology students, and women, youth, and community organizers and change-makers.

Responding to Collins' invitation to join in the work of furthering the analysis presented and initiated with *Lethal Intersections* may take many directions. Comparative research may be pursued on the shapes of resistance rising in different cultural contexts to face particular forms of lethal intersections. Research may also be pursued transnationally, exploring how collective forms of resistance to intersectional violence located in specific times and places may flourish and grow by travelling across national and racialized borders.

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