

AGENCY AND RESISTANCE TO OVERLAPPING OPPRESSIONS

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Course developed as an advanced BA seminar

Taught Summer 2021 at University of Hamburg Institute of Philosophy

Course Description

Over the past 50 years, the field of feminist philosophy has brought about a breakthrough in theorizing oppression, injustice, and the effects of unjust social structures. The philosophical work of women of color and other marginalized scholars have especially shown how rigorous inquiry in social philosophy must attend to the complex ways that multiple forms of oppression—such as oppression based on race, class, ability, sexual identity, and gender—work together and reinforce one another.

This seminar examines how feminist accounts of oppression—especially US Black feminist theorizations of multiple, overlapping forms of oppression—can challenge and enrich the core philosophical concept of *agency*. Agency plays a key role in many debates in analytic philosophy—in action theory, political philosophy, and moral philosophy, where agency is often intertwined with the value attributed to autonomy. However, discussions in these fields often overlook the rich dynamic among agency, oppressive social structures, and resistance. By engaging with readings from feminist social and political philosophy, from Black feminist thought, and from philosophical debates about agency, we will seek to answer the following questions:

- How can philosophers improve our analyses to make our concepts more adequate for describing the non-ideal social world in which we live?
- How can philosophical understandings of agency be informed and enriched by considering the theories and practices of women of color and others resisting complex forms of oppression?
- What role can or should be played by philosophy to facilitate the work of feminist and other emancipatory political projects?

Reading Schedule

Week 1 Introduction and Syllabus Discussion
Reading (in class): Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival” (poem)
Activity: Students identify figures of possible and actual agency in Lorde’s poem

Unit 1: What is oppression?

Week 2 Theme: Oppression as social and political phenomenon
Primary Reading: Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), 39–65
Secondary Reading: Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality* (1983), 1–16

- Week 3 Theme: Epistemic oppression and the resilience of oppressive systems
Primary Reading: Kristie Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115–38
Secondary Reading: Ann Cudd, “Oppression: The Fundamental Injustice of Social Institutions,” in *Analyzing Oppression* (2006), 3–27
- Week 4 Theme: Social structure and critique
Primary Reading: Sally Haslanger, “What Is a (Social) Structural Explanation?” *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (2016): 113–30
Secondary Readings: Haslanger, “Agency within Structures and Warranted Resistance: Response to Commentators,” *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 1 (2019): 109–21; Ann Cudd, “Social Groups and Institutional Constraints,” in *Analyzing Oppression* (2006), 28–54

Unit 2: Overlapping oppressions: US Black Feminism as Theoretical Framework

- Week 5 Theme: Intersectionality and interlocking oppressions
Primary Readings: [1] Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017), 15–27
[2] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–167
Secondary Reading: Kristie Dotson, “Making Sense: The Multistability of Oppression and the Importance of Intersectionality,” in *Why Race and Gender Still Matter*, ed. Goswami et al. (2014), 43–58
- Week 6 **Split session: students read either [A] or [B]. In small groups, students present the text they read to those who read the other text.**
Theme: The social context of US Black feminism
Primary Readings: [A] Class and social positionality
Reading: Patricia Hill Collins, “Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression,” in *Black Feminist Thought*, rev. edition (2000), 51–75
[B] Discursive norms and controlling images
Reading: Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought*, rev. edition (2000), 76–106
Secondary Reading for both [A] and [B]: Collins, “US Black Feminism in Transnational Context,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), 245–68
- Week 7 Theme: Self-definition as resistance
Primary Readings: [1] Patricia Hill Collins, “The Power of Self-Definition,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), 107–132
[2] bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), 41–49

Course Plan – Agency and Resistance to Overlapping Oppressions (Caleb Ward)

Secondary Reading: Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), 251–271

- Week 8 Theme: Developing resistant knowledge and action I
Readings: From Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984):
[1] “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 36–39
[2] “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” 40–44
[3] “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 53–59
[4] “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” 110–113
[5] “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” 114–123
- Week 9 Theme: Developing Resistant Knowledge and Action II
Primary Reading: Audre Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” in *Sister Outsider* (1984), 81–109
Secondary Reading: Serene Khader, “Civility, Silence, and Epistemic Labor in Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*,” in *Neglected Classics of Philosophy, Vol. 2*, ed. Schliesser (2022), 239–259

Unit 3: Agency and Resistance

- Week 10 Theme: Approaching Agency from Action Theory
Primary Reading: Tamar Schapiro, “Three Conceptions of Action in Moral Theory,” *Noûs* 35, no. 1 (2001): 93–117
Secondary Reading: Michael Bratman, “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency,” in *Structures of Agency* (2007), 21–46
- Week 11 Theme: Uptake and the misconstrual of agency
Readings: [1] Alisa Bierria, “Missing in Action: Violence, Power, and Discerning Agency,” *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (2014): 129–145
[2] Bierria, “Racial Conflation: Rethinking Agency, Black Action, and Criminal Intent,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* (2022): 575–594
- Week 12 Theme: Epistemic agency and epistemic resistance
Primary Reading: José Medina, “Meta-Lucidity, ‘Epistemic Heroes,’ and the Everyday Struggle Toward Epistemic Justice,” in *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013), 186–249
- Week 13 Theme: Theorizing beyond the duality of resistance vs. conformity
Primary Reading: Serene Khader, “Self-Respect under Conditions of Oppression,” in *Respect: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Dean and Sensen (2021), 232–51
Secondary Reading: María Lugones, “Tactical Strategies of the Street Walker,” in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (2003), 207–237
- Week 14 Student final paper workshop: presentations of final paper prospectuses