

Toward Radical Democratic Justice: Agonistic Democracy, Intersectional Feminism, and the Politics of Difference

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Roads to Democracies**

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Abstract

Democratic theory has long grappled with the challenge of how to navigate the politics of difference while safeguarding against domination. Within this debate, agonistic democracy offers a compelling starting point due to its rejection of consensus-oriented models of democracy that obscure power relations under the guise of neutral deliberation. By foregrounding the constitutive inevitability of political conflict, agonistic theory reconceptualises democracy as a space of ongoing contestation among legitimate adversaries rather than the pursuit of final agreement. However, while agonistic democracy provides a powerful critique of consensus theory, it remains limited in its capacity to fully account for how power structures shape participation, epistemic subject formation, and the normative orientation of democratic struggle. This thesis addresses these limitations by placing agonistic democratic theory in dialogue with intersectional feminist scholarship. It investigates three central questions: how power affects who is able to participate in plural democratic systems and under what conditions; who counts as a democratic subject, whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate; and what democratic politics should ultimately aim to achieve beyond the management of conflict. Through conceptual analysis and critical theoretical synthesis, the study identifies three interrelated limitations within agonistic democratic theory: the abstraction of power away from historically embedded structures of domination; the underdeveloped role of standpoint epistemology in democratic subject formation; and the absence of normative criteria for distinguishing between emancipatory and domination-reinforcing forms of political contestation. Building on insights from intersectional feminist theory, in a mutually reinforcing exchange, the thesis develops a more socially grounded account of democratic pluralism that foregrounds how intersecting systems of oppression structure political participation, authority, and knowledge production. The framework is then applied to questions of governance and sustainability, demonstrating how a justice-oriented democratic approach must prioritise those situated at intersecting margins of power. Ultimately, the thesis argues that democracy should preserve pluralistic contestation while orienting political struggle toward dismantling structurally embedded systems of domination.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Central Challenge of Democratic Theory: Protecting Difference, Preventing Domination

Contemporary democratic theory is characterised by persistent disagreement over the meaning, scope, and normative foundations of democracy. A substantial body of political theory has therefore been devoted to defining democracy and establishing the standards by which democratic legitimacy should be judged. Across this literature, contributions to democratic theory adopt divergent focal points, ranging from analyses of institutional design and procedural responsibilities to examinations of decision-making processes and the appropriate scope of democratic engagement across different localities. Across these diverse approaches, democratic theory continues to grapple with a central and enduring tension: how democratic systems can accommodate social difference and pluralism while preventing domination (Young, 2000; Bellamy, 2007). In increasingly heterogeneous societies marked by persistent inequalities of power (Young, 1990), this tension raises fundamental questions about who is able to participate in democratic politics, how political claims are recognised as legitimate, and what normative standards democratic institutions ought to pursue. This thesis is therefore situated within this core challenge of democratic theory.

Before radical democratic theory was established as the ontological foundation for normative agonistic expression, scholars largely approached this problem through consensus-oriented models of democracy. Within this tradition, scholars such as Robert Dahl and Jürgen Habermas developed influential accounts that emphasised procedural fairness and reasoned agreement as the basis of democratic legitimacy. Dahl's pluralist model of democracy conceptualised political systems as arenas of competition between interest groups in which power is relatively dispersed and managed through institutionalised bargaining (Dahl, 1956). Through mechanisms such as voting equality and stable institutional procedures, democratic conflict could be channelled into regulated competition, enabling collective decisions to emerge from balanced group interaction (Dahl, 1956). Similarly, Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy grounds legitimacy in processes of communicative rationality, where free and equal participants engage in reason-giving dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding and the possibility of rational consensus (Habermas, 1996). Despite detailed differences, these approaches share the assumption that democratic institutions can ultimately transform disagreement into consensus through appropriate procedures or deliberative engagement.

However, such consensus-oriented models have been widely criticised for underestimating the constitutive role of power and conflict in democratic life. Radical democratic theory, most prominently articulated by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985), rejects the ideal of consensus-oriented democracy and instead conceptualises democracy as a field of permanent contestation shaped by hegemonic struggles over meaning, identity and power. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971), radical theorists argue that the apparent achievement of consensus often conceals the contingent stabilisation of dominant discourses that marginalise dissenting perspectives, resulting in a "tyranny of majority" (Mouffe, 2000). From this perspective, democratic legitimacy is dependent on conflict through hegemonic struggle in order to decide the temporary status of hegemonic orders (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

While radical democratic theory and Mouffe's normative articulation through agonistic pluralism, provide a powerful ontological account of conflict as constitutive of democracy, it leaves several questions underdeveloped. In particular, it offers a relatively abstract conception of power with limited engagement of the ways in which race, gender and colonial structures shape this democratic conflict (Lugones, 2008). In addition, the theory has little explicit theorisation of how epistemic hierarchies shape whose knowledge and claims are recognised, influencing who appears as a democratic subject within contestation (Fraser, 2000). Moreover, its normative criteria for judging competing hegemonic projects remain comparatively thin, with limited criteria for judging which hegemonic projects are just and democratic (August, 2024). Responding to these limitations requires developing a more operationalizable framework for understanding and measuring democratic practice while retaining conflict as constitutive. It is here that intersectional feminist theory, particularly the work of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, offers crucial resources for deepening agonistic democracy. By conceptualising power as interlocking systems of domination (hooks, 1984), developing standpoint epistemologies (Collins, 2019) that foreground the knowledge of marginalised groups, and insisting on equity-oriented normative commitments to dismantling structural oppression, this thesis posits that intersectional feminist theory provides tools for understanding how democratic conflicts are structured and whose participation is enabled or constrained.

As such, this thesis argues that by bringing these traditions into dialogue and reading the strengths and contributions of agonist democracy alongside the strengths and contributions of intersectional feminist theorists, allows for a richer and deeper account of democracy's ontological and normative conditions. This thesis therefore asks: how can intersectional feminist theory challenge or deepen agonistic democracy, and in doing so reimagine governance and sustainability as radical, justice-oriented projects? To answer this question, the thesis will focus on how intersectional feminist theories addresses the weaknesses identified within agonistic democracy and agonistic pluralism, deepening its contributions to

democratic frameworks. In doing so, it will show that read together, the two traditions generate three critical insights that help confront the central challenge of democratic theory: accommodating pluralism while preventing domination. These insights clarify how power operates, how democratic subjects emerge, and what justice-oriented aims democratic institutions ought to pursue.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Agonistic Democracy and Intersectional Feminist Thought

Both emerging from critiques of consensus-oriented political theory, agonistic democracy and intersectional feminist theory can be placed in productive dialogue. As earlier liberal approaches have often been criticised for privileging agreement and procedural legitimacy and obscuring power asymmetries that shape the voices, interests and identities recognised in plural democracies, their common rejection of such consensus-orientation justifies their interchange in this thesis. On the one hand, agonistic democracy places a radical democratic emphasis on the persistence of conflict in plural societies and rejects the notion that political disagreement can or should be fully reconciled (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2000). As such, agonistic democracy represents one of the most influential articulations of radical democracy, grounded in the claim that conflict is constitutive of politics rather than a pathology to be overcome.

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist framework also rejects the idea of a singular, economically determined political subject and instead conceptualises politics as the contingent articulation of plural identities whose demands are organised through shifting alliances or chains of equivalence that contest prevailing hegemonic orders (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In Mouffe's (2000) model of agonistic pluralism, she further develops this position by arguing that democratic institutions ought to transform antagonistic conflict (characterised by destructive friend-enemy contestation) into constructive agonism which enables adversaries to struggle over competing visions of justice within democratic rules rather than eliminating conflict altogether. Several scholars, including Bonnie Honig (1993) and James Tully (2008) have contributed to the wider diverse literature on agonistic democracy, however this paper focuses specifically on Mouffe's formulation of the theory and articulation of agonistic pluralism. As such, the thesis engages primarily with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) and Mouffe's specific model of agonistic pluralism elaborated in *The Democratic Paradox* (2000). Given that the former is the ur-text for radical democratic theory, this text was selected for its comprehensive introduction to the ontological foundations of antagonistic conflict as constitutive of democracy. Mouffe's independent text was chosen as one of Mouffe's earliest expressions of agonistic democracy in the form of agonistic pluralism. This was selected for its normative transformation of antagonism into agonism and procedural contributions to agonistic theory. Together, they provide a strong reference point for

understanding the potential of radical, agonistic theories in response to democracy's central challenge.

From a similarly consensus-critical standpoint, intersectional feminist theory foregrounds the structural organisation of power across multiple, mutually constitutive axes of domination. First formalised by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality theory investigates how experiences of inequality are shaped through overlapping systems such as race, gender and class. Much like agonistic theory, intersectional feminist theory is represented by a broad, heterogenous body of work with multiple articulations. This thesis focuses specifically on the contributions of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks¹. It focuses on these thinkers thanks to their essential theorisations of power which provide both a structural analysis and a normative framework which orients democracy toward equitable justice. Collins' concepts of the matrix of domination (1990; 2019) and hooks' account of interlocking systems of oppression (hooks, 1984), illuminate how multiple power regimes interact to shape social hierarchies and political marginalisation. As such, the primary texts examined from intersectional feminist thought are Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), and hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). These texts have been selected for their systematic articulation of intersectional power analysis and their normative commitments to justice-oriented democratic transformation.

Despite these shared commitments to power analysis, pluralism, and the critique of consensus democracy, a significant tension remains between agonistic theory's conceptualisation of domination primarily through the abstract logic of hegemony, versus intersectional feminism's foregrounding of concrete, structurally embedded systems of domination which operate across intersecting social hierarchies. This divergence raises important questions – and a central theoretical gap concerning how these theories can complement one another to capture power in action, whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate and what democratic systems should ultimately be aiming for. It is this theoretical gap that this thesis seeks to address.

1.3 Theoretical Gap and Thesis Contribution

This thesis addresses this gap, not by positioning intersectional theory as a corrective for agonistic theory, but by illuminating the ways in which intersectional feminist ideas can deepen agonistic frameworks and in effect, how agonistic ideas, in turn can help ground intersectional aspirations through a mutually reinforcing relationship. It shows that despite their important alignments, agonistic democracy and intersectional feminist theory diverge on the topics of power, epistemic subject formation and normativity, in ways that reveal productive theoretical

¹ The name "bell hooks" is intentionally lower case to honour the theorist's stylised wish to focus attention on her creative and political commitments and mark a political rejection of conventional notions of individual greatness.

tensions and fertile ground for an enriched joint reading. First, building on radical democratic theory, agonistic democracy conceptualises power primarily as abstract discursive hegemony. This refers to a struggle among adversarial political projects competing to shape the meaning of “the political” through temporary stabilisation of hegemonic authority (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2000) which pays little attention to material power structures such as race, gender and class. By contrast, intersectional feminist theory theorises power as concrete and structurally embedded domination, operating through mutually constitutive hierarchies of race, gender, class and other social relations (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984) but risks under-theorising political articulation and contingency. Second, agonistic democracy’s account of democratic subject formation asserts that actors become politically articulated through chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). This provides a strong foundation for the possibility of coalition-building but remains largely detached from standpoint epistemology and the impact of historically situated positions on capacities to acquire knowledge, democratically articulate, and contest power. Intersectional theorists, however, emphasise how marginalised groups often possess distinctive critical epistemic insight into structures of domination precisely because of their social positioning (Collins, 1990), but under-theorise the contingency inherent in democratic politics, leaving open questions of how such insights can be effectively articulated within pluralistic arenas. Third, while agonistic democracy offers a compelling ontology of ineradicable conflict, and agonistic pluralism refines this through the concept of productive agonism, the theories provide a relatively limited normative criteria for distinguishing democratic contestation that *challenges* domination from conflict that *reproduces* it. Intersectional feminist theory, conversely, offers rich normative analysis of injustice but has engaged less systematically with agonism’s emphasis on the permanence of political antagonism. Taken together, these divergences reveal a theoretical gap where neither framework singly fully reconciles the tension between pluralistic contestation and justice-oriented democratic transformation.

This thesis addresses that gap by placing the two traditions in constructive dialogue. Rather than positioning intersectional feminism as a fix to agonistic democracy, it shows how intersectional insights can illuminate and deepen agonism’s blind spots, creating a complementary engagement that enriches understandings of democracy in a way that contributes to the democratic challenge of managing difference without domination. Reading Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the matrix of domination (1990) and bell hooks’ analysis of interlocking systems of power (1984) in dialogue with agonistic democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe, 2000), the thesis develops three core insights concerning power, epistemic subject formation, and normative criteria for a radical, justice-oriented democratic project. In doing so, the thesis asserts that intersectional analysis enriches agonism’s ontology and strengthens its normative foundations by providing a more equity-oriented vision of radical

democracy. Taken together, democratic ambition can become grounded in the preservation of conflict alongside prioritisation of difference at the margins.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This thesis asks: How can intersectional feminist theory challenge or deepen agonistic democracy, and in doing so, reimagine governance and sustainability as radical, justice-oriented projects? To systematically address this question, the paper is guided by three secondary research questions: (1) How does power operate to affect who can participate in plural democracies and under what conditions? (2) Who counts as a democratic subject, or constitutes “the people,” and whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate? (3) What should democracy aim for beyond managing conflict? These secondary questions structure the theoretical dialogue, ensuring that the gaps identified in agonistic democracy, conceptualised as issues of power, epistemic subject formation, and questions of normativity, are systematically addressed through the exploration of intersectional feminist insights against these three concerns. Questions 1 and 2 facilitate the theoretical synthesis of power and subject formation, while question 3 interrogates the practical implications of normative, justice-oriented criteria which will be illustrated through two case studies exploring practical applications of the synthesis in governance and sustainability contexts

The thesis hypothesises that intersectional feminist theory deepens agonistic democracy in three interrelated ways. First, it shows that power should be conceptualised as a matrix of interlocking systems to understand how agonistic conflicts unfold in practice. Second, it demonstrates that democratic subject formation is contingent, operating within historically structured epistemic hierarchies, where standpoint-informed knowledge from marginalised positions can meaningfully shape the trajectory of democratic struggle. Third, these insights come together to assert that democracy ought to preserve pluralistic contestation while prioritising those at intersecting margins, orienting political action toward dismantling structurally embedded domination.

These hypotheses are tested through case studies that operationalise governance and sustainability as sites of acute political contestation. The campaigns analysed are Five X More and the Ella Roberta Campaign. Rooted in contemporary, British politics, these case studies show how a complementary reading of agonistic democracy with intersectionality theories can preserve contestation, reconfigure epistemic hierarchies, and transform the experiences, including the grief and emotion of marginalised, Black² mothers into legitimate political claims.

² In this thesis, ‘Black’ is capitalised to acknowledge a shared history of racialised oppression and cultural identity, consistent with conventions in critical race scholarship.

In doing so, the thesis illustrates how pluralism and difference can be accommodated while preventing domination, setting normative standards radical democratic justice.

1.5 Thesis Roadmap and Methodological Approach

This thesis employs conceptual analysis and critical synthesis followed by a theory-informed application to governance and sustainability. It is structured around the three interrelated limitations identified in agonistic democracy: the abstraction of power, the underdeveloped role of standpoint epistemology in democratic subject formation, and the lack of normative criteria for distinguishing just from domination-reinforcing contestation. These form the guiding framework of the study.

Chapter 2 deconstructs agonistic democracy, undertaking a close textual analysis of its radical ontology and normative layers through focusing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, principally *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) and Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox* (2000). This chapter establishes agonism's ontology of conflict, hegemony, and pluralism. It identifies its internal tensions regarding power, epistemic subject formation, and normativity before applying the theory to the case of London's Grenfell Tower fire to illustrate the limitations of agonistic democracy alone. Chapter 3 introduces intersectional feminist theory as a critical interlocutor, responding to the limitations of agonistic theory. It engages Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019) alongside bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). This chapter analyses how intersectional frameworks conceptualise matrixed and interlocking systems of power, prioritise marginalised voices, and articulate normative standards of transformative justice, directly addressing the limitations identified in agonistic theory.

Chapter 4 brings these traditions into constructive dialogue, showing how intersectional insights can deepen agonistic theory producing three core insights – namely, reconceptualising power as interlocking systems to understand agonistic conflicts in practice; the conception of democratic subject formation as standpoint-informed and contingent; and establishing justice-oriented, margin-prioritisation as a normative criterion. Chapter 5 applies these insights to case studies of governance – using the Five X More campaign – and sustainability - exploring the work of the Ella Roberta Foundation. These case studies demonstrate how the three theoretical insights translate in practice at sites of acute political contestation to accommodate difference and protect from domination. Chapter 6 concludes the work by synthesising findings and reflecting on their implications for a radical justice-oriented, pluralist, and equity-focused democratic theory.

Chapter 2- Deconstructing Agonistic Democracy: Conflict Ontology and Internal Tensions

2.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 2 begins the thesis by examining the theoretical foundations and limitations of agonistic democracy and its specific articulation as agonistic pluralism, with particular attention to how the agonistic framework addresses conflict, power, and democratic legitimacy. The chapter shows that while agonistic democracy has made an important contribution to democratic thought by foregrounding the constitutive role of conflict, as per radical democratic theories, significant tensions remain in its treatment of power, epistemology, and normative judgement. It will show how these tensions risk exposing vulnerable groups to political domination under the guise of essential conflict. Understanding these tensions first requires clarifying the radical theoretical architecture from which agonistic democracy emerges.

Section 2.2 therefore situates agonistic democracy within the broader tradition of radical democracy. It will show how agonistic democracy builds on a radical democratic vision focussed on the continuous expansion of democratic practices and values of inclusion, pluralism and the ontology of constitutive conflict. It then explores agonistic democracy, as a normative expression or radical thought. To achieve this, it begins with an examination of Laclau and Mouffe's joint 1985 work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. It shows how the work establishes conflict as democracy's vital core in response to the central tension of democracy between accommodating pluralism and maintaining political cohesion, which it argues cannot be resolved through seeking rational agreement. It then turns to Mouffe's independent work, *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) to explore her formulation of agonistic democracy as the normative project of radical democracy in which she institutionalises radical antagonism through transformation into productive agonism in the model of agonistic pluralism.

Section 2.3 then examines the three tensions pronounced in agonistic democracy central to this thesis. These are- the framework's relatively thin account of power, its limited engagement with epistemic positionality and democratic subject formation, and its under-specified normative core. This section argues that by celebrating conflict without offering rubric for judging which hegemonic projects advance justice, taken alone, agonistic democracy exposes vulnerable groups to systemic violence under the mask of necessary conflict.

Finally, Section 2.4 illustrates these tensions and vulnerabilities through a case study of the Grenfell Tower fire in London. Using the events of the fire as a framework, it demonstrates how the absence of safeguards addressing structural power, epistemic exclusion, and normative standards of justice can allow democratic institutions to reproduce domination rather than contest it.

2.2 From Radical Democracy to Agonistic Pluralism

2.2.1 *Radical Democracy and the Ontology of Political Conflict*

To understand agonistic democracy and Mouffe's specific model of agonistic pluralism, it is necessary first to orient oneself to the foundational insights of radical democracy upon which agonistic theories are built. What renders radical democracy truly "radical", is its systemic expansion of democratic struggle beyond formal representative institutions and into civil society, culture, and everyday social relations through counter-hegemonic mobilisation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). From this perspective, democracy is conceived not as an equilibrium-seeking project or race towards rational consensus as in pluralist or deliberative models, but as the ongoing contestation of hegemonic formations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Agonistic democracy emerges as a normative specification of radical democracy, building a more robust conflict framework. Agonistic democracy's post-structuralist conception of "the political" contributes a basic normative understanding of how antagonistic conflict can be channelled and institutionally normalised. This relationship between radical democracy and agonistic democracy is crucial: radical democracy constitutes the broader political project, framing democracy as characterised by continuous hegemonic struggle and agonistic democracy rises as the normative response to this conflict ontology.

Radical democracy, most systematically developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), supplies a robust ontological framework for understanding democracy. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's (1932) account of political tensions and the friend-enemy distinction, radical democracy recognises that political life is structured by ineradicable, hegemonic power struggles (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Yet, precisely because of its ontological ambition, radical democracy remains normatively and institutionally under-specified, offering limited guidance about how antagonistic struggle can be regulated within democratic life (August, 2024). While analytically generative, the theory leaves open the question of how provisional hegemonic articulations might be stabilised or made compatible with legitimate democratic processes. It is here that agonistic democracy, and specifically Mouffe's agonistic pluralism emerges as a necessary normative articulation, specifying how conflicts can be regulated through institutions and transformed into contestation between legitimate adversaries agonistic pluralism (2000).

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe articulate radical democratic theory as an explicitly ontological project, examining the conditions under which social and political orders are constituted. Situated within an anti-essentialist framework, the theory rejects the reduction of identities to fixed categories such as class, race, or gender, instead conceptualising them as relational and discursively constructed through articulatory practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Its post-foundational orientation is evident in the claim that social

orders are similarly constructed, contingent, and temporarily stabilised through hegemonic projects – remaining subject to contestation. In this light, because identities are relationally constructed and negotiated through ongoing struggles that simultaneously attempt to establish political dominance, antagonism, and therefore conflict, is rendered ineradicable in democratic life where hegemonic power is both the product and the goal of such contests (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 86).

This contingency and perpetual openness to challenge across all areas of political life is, in part, what makes radical democracy radical: democracy is not a static equilibrium or consensus, but a continuous contestation over meanings, norms, and power relations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). By emphasising the fluidity of social orders and the constitutive role of conflict, radical democracy provides a robust descriptive framework, laying the ontological foundation for normative elaborations in agonistic pluralism. Understanding this ontological scaffolding is therefore crucial for appreciating how agonistic democracy builds upon and gives shape to the radical insight that conflict is constitutive of political life.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, power is a constitutive force that shapes contingent and temporary social orders, producing identities, roles, and “the people” rather than being fixed or given (1985, p. 104). Here, constitutive refers to the idea that the organisation of society are produced via struggles for power, not given or prescribed. Hegemony functions as the political logic of this power, whereby “particular social forces assume the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. x). In other words, hegemony refers to the articulation of power through negotiated and renegotiation contestation ending in the temporary stabilisation of a dominant discourse. Competing for this hegemonic power, social groups unite across differences, forming coalitions - chains of equivalence - to articulate common demands and mobilise collectively against a shared opponent, forming counter-hegemonic blocs (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 85).

An example of such coalition-building can be seen through alliances between anti-racist and feminist movements who unite under broad anti-capitalist struggles, despite divergent identities and priorities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Fragmentation within social categories, such as class, means that coalition-building is always contingent and provisional. Andrew Friedman, (1977, cited in Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 82) illustrates this in the British labour context, where “women and immigrants are generally situated in the unprotected Market”, reflecting embedded power relations that produce divergent capacities for resistance. Far from limiting political action, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) such disparities highlight both the necessity and possibility of chains of equivalence, demonstrating how contingent hegemonic orders are constantly negotiated and contested (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

However, to properly comprehend radical theory's conceptualisation of contingent identities and ineradicable contestation in political life requires an appreciation of *antagonism*. Counter-hegemonic challenges to dominant orders appear, within radical democratic theory, as antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Antagonism refers to not merely practical disagreement but the constitutive frontier through which political identities are formed and opposed (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Building on Schmitt's friend-enemy concept, Laclau and Mouffe argue that, since the political emerges precisely through relations of opposition, collective mobilisation requires the construction of boundaries between "us" and "them" (Schmitt, 1932; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. xvi). Through such frontiers, identities are not simply expressed, they are produced, negotiated, stabilised, and rearticulated through conflict for individuals but also for collectives via chains of equivalence, and allied counter-hegemonic blocs (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 55).

Radical theory therefore holds that because identities are relational and contingent, conflict is ineradicable. Social orders are only ever temporarily stabilised through hegemonic articulation and remain permanently open to contestation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Herein lies the fundamental contribution of radical theory – its conception of antagonism naturalises contestation as intrinsic to democratic life, rather than as a deviation from consensus. In doing so, the theory exposes the limits of consensus- or equilibrium-based models that assume rational reconciliation is possible (Mouffe, 2000). By foregrounding constitutive conflict and embracing contestation as a core of democracy, radical democracy provides an ontological justification for democracy as an arena of ongoing struggle. Moreover, it establishes the conceptual groundwork for later attempts, notably via agonistic pluralism, to transform antagonism into a more *productive*, less *destructive* form of conflict without denying its permanent presence.

This groundwork is strengthened by radical theory's extension of political spaces by conceptualising contestation as a fundamental and inescapable feature of democratic life that extends beyond formal liberal institutions (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Positioning conflict as intrinsic to democracy, has enabled the agonistic democracy to radically expand the sites and conditions of democratic struggle, emphasising that political contention occurs outside, and often independently, of institutional procedures (Mouffe, 2005). Critically, Laclau and Mouffe observe that "there is no surface which is not constantly subverted by the over-determining effects of others" (2001, pp. 180–181). This signals the impossibility of delimiting arenas of political contestation and provides a possibility for once depoliticised "private" struggles to be seen as politically legitimate sites exchange. This connects to the notion of the "demonstration effect," whereby struggles in one sphere catalyse challenges in others, revealing previously overlooked sites of political significance (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Advocating for direct democracy beyond representation and encouraging grassroots participation in democratic life, radical democratic theory dissolves conventional public-private distinctions, legitimising contestation in domains including the family, economy, sexuality, and education and (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The framework thus reconceptualises democracy as diffuse and multidimensional characterised by expansive, ongoing engagement with power and hegemonic claims rather than institutional closure (Mouffe, 2005). Upon analysis, this expansion of democratic struggle beyond liberal institutions into previously private spaces and substantive redefinition of legitimate political conflicts in formally depoliticised spaces, makes democratic life more inclusive and dynamic (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

The strengths of radical democracy as an ontological project and foundation for agonistic democracy are plenty. With philosophical lineages traceable to Friedrich Nietzsche (1886; 1887) and Hannah Arendt (1958), the strengths of radical democracy lie partly in its call to direct democracy and radical extension of political participation across all levels. The potential for coalition-building illustrates how diverse actors can mobilise against dominant powers, presenting a more optimistic space for democratic possibility compared to consensus-oriented models. The central concept of antagonism, through which political identities are formed and opposed, and the mechanism of chains of equivalence, whereby diverse actors articulate shared demands to form counter-hegemonic coalitions form a strong ontological basis for normative articulations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

By foregrounding the contingency of social orders and the relational construction of political identities, radical democracy expands the arena of legitimate contestation beyond formal institutions to include civil society, culture, and social movements. Rejecting economic reductionism and essentialism, it moves beyond classical Marxism and recognises the multiplicity of struggles that exceed class determination (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 1–4).

Yet precisely because of its ontological ambition, radical democracy remains normatively and institutionally under-specified meaning it *requires* the normative expression that agonistic theory brings. While descriptively rich, the theory leaves open the question of how antagonistic struggle should be organised within democratic life, offering limited criteria for democratic regulation or concrete institutional mechanisms for just and productive conflict (August, 2024). This points to a conceptual gap. It is here that agonistic democracy emerges as a necessary normative articulation by transforming antagonism into adversarial contestation within shared democratic rules. It is clear to see how *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) introduces radical democracy as the ontological layer, for agonistic democracy to build upon with regulatory expression. Distinguishing this relationship between the two projects, clarifies the theoretical architecture beneath agonistic democracy and Mouffe's model of agonistic

pluralism which, as the next subsection shows, refines this normative elaboration through the transformation of antagonism into agonism to meet the demands of plural democracies.

2.2.2 Agonistic Pluralism: Normative Articulation and Structural Tensions

Atop the ontological foundations of radical democracy, agonistic democracy emerges as its normative response. Against this backdrop, agonistic pluralism constitutes Mouffe's refined model (Mouffe, 2000). While the concept is further developed in subsequent works, *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), Mouffe advances a specified normative framework designed to regulate such conflict within democratic institutions. While the model is developed further in later works (2005, 2013) this thesis is concerned with its formal introduction in *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) as the early, foundational expression of the framework. In this work, Mouffe presents agonistic pluralism as a response to what she terms the democratic paradox: the tension within liberal democracy between the values of pluralism, diversity, and difference, and the persistent aspiration of deliberative and consensus-oriented models to achieve rational agreement (Mouffe, 2000). In critique of deliberative democracy, Mouffe argues that attempts to eliminate conflict misunderstand the nature of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2000). In direct response to this limitation, agonistic pluralism is proposed as a normative democratic model practicable within liberal-democratic institutions. Crucially, it is designed not to resolve conflict through consensus but to structure and legitimise ongoing contestation between adversaries (Mouffe, 2000).

Agonistic pluralism translates the ontological insights of radical democracy - including the contingency of social orders, relational construction of identities, the permanence of political conflict - into a refined normative criterion for democratic contestation and pluralist governance (Mouffe, 2000). While radical democracy establishes that conflict is constitutive of political life, it provides limited guidance for how such conflict should be organised within democratic institutions. Mouffe's intervention therefore frames these insights through a specific pluralist framework, seeking not to eliminate conflict but to transform its form and conditions (Mouffe, 2000). Central to this transformation is the distinction between antagonism and agonism. Here, the friend-enemy logic of antagonism which denotes the perception of political opponents as existential enemies whose positions must be eradicated (Schmitt, 1932/2007), is transformed into a conflict between political "adversaries" (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe reworks the insight of antagonistic conflict between enemies by arguing that democratic politics must instead cultivate productive agonistic relations, in which opponents recognise each other as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies (Mouffe, 2000, p. 13).

This transformation from antagonism to agonism and thus of enemies to adversaries constitutes the essential core of agonistic pluralism. In antagonistic conflict, as per radical democracy, political actors deny the legitimacy of their opponents, leading to exclusion or

attempts at elimination. By contrast, through agonistic pluralism, agonistic democracy demands adversarial respect between parties, a minimal form of recognition whereby competing actors acknowledge their opponents' right to defend alternative interpretations of the common good (Mouffe, 2018). This concept is developed in Mouffe's later works. Adversaries are therefore opponents whose ideas may be vigorously contested but whose legitimacy as participants in democratic struggle is not denied (Mouffe, 2000). This transformation preserves the intensity and passion of political conflict while preventing it from degenerating into destructive hostility.

The distinction between antagonistic and agonistic relations is intrinsically tied to the ontological distinction Mouffe makes between the political and politics (Mouffe, 2000, p.101). For Mouffe, the political refers to the ever-present dimension of antagonism inherent in human societies: the potential for division, exclusion, and conflict that arises from the plurality of identities and interests (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 101–102). Politics, by contrast, consists of the institutions, discourses, and practices through which societies attempt to organise and regulate this conflict. It is here, within the conditions of "politics" that agonistic democracy can emerge. Critically, politics requires institutional channels that transform antagonistic relations into agonistic engagement (Mouffe, 2000). It is possible to see here how agonistic pluralism accepts the permanence of conflict while emphasising the democratic task of structuring it productively.

A further condition for agonistic democracy is that adversaries establish shared ethico-political principles such as liberty and equality that govern conflict (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102). through commitment to shared values while struggling agonistically over the interpretation and application of such principles, resulting in somewhat of a conflictual consensus (Mouffe 1993). Political actors may share a commitment to liberty and equality while radically disagreeing about how these values should be realised in practice. As Mouffe observes, "Democracy requires a conflictual consensus: agreement on the rules of the game, but not on the outcomes" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 103). This shared symbolic space allows adversaries to struggle over meaning without rejecting the democratic framework itself.

Within this model of agonistic democracy, hegemonic contestation remains central. Agonistic democracy does not eliminate these struggles, established as temporary stabilisations of power discussed in her shared work with Laclau, but relocates them within institutionalised arenas of regulation and political principles. Agonistic public spaces thus enable competing projects to contest hegemonic authority while recognising each other as legitimate opponents with a shared commitment to liberty and equality. In this way, agonistic pluralism reconciles agonistic democracy's ontological claim that conflict is ineradicable with the normative

requirements of plural democracies. Thus, agonistic democracy, transforms potentially destructive antagonism into a productive and enduring feature of democratic life.

Despite its theoretical sophistication, agonistic democracy must be understood through both its contributions and its tensions. At its core, the theory reframes democracy by embracing conflict as constitutive rather than incidental, foregrounding the ineradicable nature of antagonism within political life (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In doing so, it offers a powerful challenge to deliberative and consensus-oriented models that risk depoliticising dissent and obscuring pluralism. These ideas are supported by Honig (1993) who emphasises the capacity of agonistic ideas to repoliticise democracy by restoring contestation as a central democratic mechanism. Similarly, Tully highlights the theory's contribution to sustaining ongoing civic freedom through the contestability of hegemonic settlements (2008). Seen this way, agonistic democracy provides a more realistic account of power and domination, recognising that democratic politics cannot be reduced to rational consensus (Wenman, 2013).

Agonistic pluralism is Chantal Mouffe's attempt to refine the normative dimension of radical democratic theory by specifying how conflict can be organised within liberal-democratic institutions. Critically though, through concepts such as adversaries and "politics", it proposes mechanisms through which antagonistic relations can be transformed into agonistic contestation revealing a critical paradox in the model. While Mouffe criticises consensus-oriented democratic theory for suppressing conflict, her model relies on a form of consensus agreement on shared ethico-political principles (Mouffe, 2000). This conflictual consensus appears to reintroduce precisely the form of normative closure that agonistic democracy seeks to resist, noting a theoretical tension within the model (August, 2024).

Consequently, although agonistic pluralism represents a significant normative refinement, critics argue that it remains insufficiently specified (August, 2024). The model often operates at a high level of abstraction, offering limited guidance regarding the institutionalisation of agonistic contestation, the operation of power, or the processes through which democratic subjects come to recognise one another as adversaries through shared commitments to ethical principles rather than enemies (Saward, 2010; Schaap, 2012). These tensions do not negate the theory's contributions but instead highlight unresolved questions that concern power, subject formation, and the normative grounding of agonistic politics. The following section examines these tensions in greater detail, focusing on the abstraction of power, the epistemic formation of political subjects, and the limits of agonistic normativity.

2.3 Core Tensions of Agonistic Pluralism: Abstraction of Power, Epistemic Subject Formation, Normativity

2.3.1 Abstraction of Power

This section of the thesis now turns to a closer examination of the three core tensions of agonistic democracy elicited earlier in the work- namely its thin abstraction of power, absence of an explicit theory of epistemology and thin normativity. This thesis recognises that there are critiques and tensions of the agonistic project that it has not addressed, such as its neglect of reconcilable conflict as a possibility (Erman 2009). However, any further criticisms remain beyond the scope of this work. This subsection provides a detailed exploration of the theory's abstraction of power. The tension concerning its thin abstraction of power and limited consideration to material structures of power is a limitation that Mouffe herself acknowledges (Mouffe, 2005). Agonistic pluralism maps power primarily as discursive hegemony among adversaries, which foregrounds relational contestation. However, it fails to account for the concrete structures of domination that shape democratic participation. In this way, Mouffe's framework overly abstracts power to discursive antagonism, failing to account for how structural inequalities such as race, gender, class, and colonial legacies, affect who can participate in agonistic conflict and which disputes gain political visibility (Mendoza Tuiz, 2024). Moreover, August (2024), critiques the arbitrariness of Mouffe's transformation of "enemies" into "adversaries," a process central to agonistic pluralism. He highlights the absence of traceable criteria or thresholds for determining legitimate versus illegitimate conflict (2024). Both agonistic democracy (the broader theoretical framework) and Mouffe's specified model of agonistic pluralism therefore offer a comparatively thin account of structural power that tends to abstract away from the material institutions and historical formations that structure participation in democratic conflict which theories with a critical post-colonial lens account for.

This abstraction has broader implications for democratic theory. By mapping conflict primarily in discursive terms, agonistic democracy also risks overlooking destructive power dynamics that exist prior to contestation such as the structural domination that operates both between and within groups, influencing aggregation, coalition-building, and intra-group cohesion (Simmel, 1940a, 1940b). August (2024) emphasises that identity-building and affective mobilisation, which Mouffe valorises, can escalate into authoritarian hierarchies or internal domination, yet the theory provides no institutional safeguards against these risks. Feminist scholars underscore these limits: Iris Marion Young (1990) highlights the importance of addressing systemic hierarchies in the context of justice-seeking, while Nancy Fraser (2008) stresses the need for resource redistribution and status recognition to make contestation meaningful. Postcolonial critiques echo this concern. Gurinder K. Bhambra (2007) shows

that abstract democratic theories, particularly Eurocentric social theories, often fail to recognise the material and historical legacies of coloniality that shape whose voices are heard.

These concerns resonate with the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose analysis of epistemic violence shows how the problem of power affects not only unequal participation inside of contestation, but extends to the question of whether marginalised groups or, “subaltern subjects” can appear within the political field at all (1988). If agonistic contestation presupposes all actors as equally capable of articulating claims within recognised discursive frameworks, then the subaltern may remain excluded from the agonistic arena. This raises fundamental questions for this thesis and the project of democratic theory generally about who can in fact participate in democratic conflict and whose differences subject them to domination through exclusion from such conflicts.

Hardt and Negri’s (2000) work on constituent power, offers a critical intervention that further emphasises the material dimensions of power overlooked by agonistic democracy. Their offering shows that democratic subjects are materially and circumstantially embedded, challenging theories that conceptualise power solely as relational or discursive. Agonistic democracy’s focus on idealised adversarial exchanges and respect therefore neglects the structural and embodied conditions that prefigure conflict, leaving invisible the ways in which inequality constrains participation and shapes outcomes.

The implications of these critiques are significant. While agonistic democracy does well theorising conflict as constitutive of political life (Honig, 1993), its abstraction of power limits its capacity to account for domination, marginalisation, and structural inequality. Without integrating material, intersectional, and postcolonial dimensions into its normative theorisations, agonistic spaces risk reproducing exclusion under the guise of pluralist contestation, much like how antecedent liberal theories obscured domination under the guise of consensus (Mendoza Tuiz, 2024). Mendoza Tuiz (2024) captures this limitation in their work which calls for the decolonising of agonism. This tension underscores the fundamental challenge for democratic theory: how to institutionalise contestation that is vibrant and inclusive of difference, while protecting from domination. Agonistic democracy’s high-level conceptualisation illuminates the inevitability and productivity of conflict, but its thin account of structural power limits its normative guidance and its capacity to accommodate systemic inequalities. As this thesis will show, this concern is addressed more systematically by intersectional and postcolonial interventions.

In sum, the abstraction of power in agonistic democracy, and in Mouffe’s refined model of agonistic pluralism, which transforms antagonism into agonistic contestation, is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it allows a broad theorisation of political contestation

(Honig, 1993). On the other hand, it risks masking the material and social constraints that determine who can legitimately participate and which conflicts become politically visible. In doing so, agonistic theory risks inadvertently flattening differences of structural vulnerability, overlooking how race, gender, and colonial power structures shape the terrain of democratic conflict. Recognising this tension is critical for understanding developing a framework that can genuinely reconcile plurality, contestation, and justice.

2.3.2. Epistemic Subject Formation

The second central criticism of agonistic democracy with which this thesis is concerned, is the absence of an explicit epistemology or theory of standpoint. While the agonistic framework powerfully reorients democratic theory to the ineradicability of conflict and the transformation of antagonism into agonistic contestation, it pays comparatively little attention to how positionality, standpoint, and epistemic location shape political knowledge, alliances, and the articulation of conflict. This omission is significant as it raises questions regarding epistemic subject formation which are critical to responding to the democratic challenge of accommodating difference without domination. Who counts as a legitimate democratic subject, who constitutes “the people,” and whose knowledge is recognised within democratic conflict are not neutral matters but are structured by existing relations of power (Spivak, 1988). While this issue inevitably intersects with the limitations concerning power (explored previously), normativity and justice (to be explore next), it raises a distinct problem concerning epistemic authority and its implications for democratic subject formation that requires address. This section therefore examines criticisms of agonistic democracy that focus on standpoint, positionality, and the formation of epistemic subjects through democratic contestation.

Standpoint epistemology sharpens frameworks around “who” and “how” participation in democratic conflict happens, providing a framework through which agonistic theories are seen to obscure the importance of knowledge and epistemology in democratic participation. In Nancy Hartsock’s 1983 seminal essay on the case for a “feminist standpoint”, the author insists that a standpoint is not merely a discursive “position” but is structured by material life-activity. Drawing on Marx, she argues that women’s structurally differentiated lives, particularly within the sexual division of labour, “make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy,” which is capable of grounding a powerful critique of patriarchal institutions (Hartsock, 1983, p. 284).. In aiming to develop a historical materialist feminist standpoint as an “epistemological tool” that can be used to progress liberatory practices, her project is explicitly epistemological and raises valid concern when compared to the project of agonism. Hartsock, much like hooks (1983), advances a thesis of epistemic asymmetry, arguing that marginalised standpoints are not simply different but often better placed to perceive relations of domination (1983). Agonistic democracy, by contrast, tends to treat adversaries as formally

equal participants in symbolic struggle, without systematically theorising how materially located standpoints shape what conflicts can be articulated, which injustices are visible or invisible, and whose interpretations illuminate domination more reliably. This draws attention to the notion that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups can generate “strong objectivity” precisely because their structural positions expose the partiality of dominant accounts (Harding, 1986).

Without such an epistemological framework, democratic contestation, as conceived in agonistic theory, risks reproducing what scholars have referred to as active ignorance (Dotson, 2011). In her work, *Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing*, Dotson (2011) uses the term active ignorance to describe the epistemic vice whereby privileged actors, actively fail to consider or perceive marginalised knowledge as a result of their location within given structures creating conditions for ignorance. For Collins (1990), standpoint epistemology is defined by the recognition that social location within intersecting power relations shapes experience and perspective, illustrating how systems of power are mutually constitutive. The absence of a comparable framework that recognises the relationship between power and knowledge differences within agonistic theory, gives rise to the hazardous assumption that all participants enter agonistic struggle on equal epistemic footing (Fraser, 2008). This can lead to the masking of ways in which contemporary hegemonies privilege certain voices while marginalising others.

For some, this theoretical limitation is characteristic of a tendency of radical Western theories to present themselves as geopolitically unmarked and “transparent,” - actively silencing historically marginalised voices while claiming to let them speak (Spivak, 1988). For Spivak, the silenced or “subaltern” woman’s consciousness is lost in “violent shuttling” between dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988). Applied to agonistic democracy, this observation suggests that without an explicit account of positionality and epistemic mediation, the staging of conflict may inadvertently reproduce and legitimise epistemic domination. This is because those already equipped with discursive capital can continue to shape the terms of contestation, while marginalised actors remain unheard or misrepresented.

This critique highlights a broader gap in agonistic democracy – that is, the absence of a formal epistemology or theory of standpoint leaves unclear how positionality shapes who counts as a legitimate democratic subject, who constitutes “the people,” as a direct result of whose knowledge is recognised as valid. Without tools for confronting and mediating against knowledge gaps and epistemic domination, there is a of rendering certain conflicts invisible and privileging the claims of actors who are already empowered by material, racial, gendered, or colonial structures (Mendoza Tuiz, 2024). This thesis argues that incorporating a standpoint-informed framework, guided by intersectional feminist insights, could allow agonistic

democracy to better specify how marginalised perspectives can inform normative judgements, guide coalitional strategies, and strengthen the emancipatory potential of agonistic contestation. This proposition will be developed further in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

2.3.3 Normativity and Democratic Judgement Criteria

The third tension within agonistic democracy, central to this thesis, relates to its under-specified normative core. While agonistic theory convincingly defends pluralism, this thesis contends that a normative thinness persists. In prioritising the management and institutionalisation of conflictual contestation, agonistic democracy provides comparatively limited guidance on what democracy should ultimately aim for beyond sustaining pluralistic struggle (August, 2024). Agonism therefore guards pluralism in theory, yet lacks clear normative standards for doing so in practice. This limited guidance for assessing which hegemonic projects are more just or legitimate, highlights an under-specified normative core. In Eva Erman's work, *What is wrong with agonistic pluralism?* (2009), she highlights that Mouffe's reliance on the establishment of "ethico-political principles," between adversaries, leaves the transformation of antagonism into agonism largely underspecified. In practice, it appears that this transformation depends on the willingness of adversaries to adopt these principles, without clear criteria over their interpretation or application. As such, Erman argues that attempts to convert enemies into legitimate adversaries risk becoming "moral choices that can neither be explained nor grounded" (2009, p. 1051). This under-specification means that agonistic theory lacks the normative tools to distinguish between agreements, hegemonic projects and destructive battles. In response to Mouffe's contention that power necessarily shapes all conflict (2000), Erman rebuts, "just because all agreements are impregnated with power, it does not follow that all are equally 'bad' or unjustified," (2009, p. 1048).

Vincent August (2024) extends this critique, arguing that the label of "agonistic conflict" is often assigned arbitrarily. He claims that Mouffe's framework does not provide "traceable criteria" for adjudicating which interactions qualify as legitimate agonistic contestation, rendering the threshold for agonistic recognition an empty signifier (August, 2024). This ambiguity, combined with the abstraction of ethico-political principles, leaves agonistic democracy exposed to exclusionary dynamics (August, 2024). August further warns that agonistic theory underestimates the "dark side" of conflict whereby the same mechanisms intended to generate group identity such as affectivity, passion, and mobilisation can also work to escalate into hierarchical or authoritarian structures, reproducing domination rather than mitigating it (2024, pp. 12-15).

The normative thinness agonistic democracy offers has profound implications for democratic theory. Without clear evaluative criteria, the theory risks legitimising unequal or unjust hegemonic projects, again privileging actors already favourably positioned to articulate

conflicts publicly. This raises a deeper question. If agonistic democracy seeks to radicalise pluralism and sustain conflictual contestation, how should the success of democracy be judged? Without clear normative benchmarks, it is difficult to determine whether democratic struggle is advancing justice, equality, or merely reproducing existing power relations (August, 2024). This tension becomes especially visible when the concerns of intersectional feminism, which foreground justice, liberation, and the dismantling of structural domination, are brought into dialogue with agonistic pluralism, which will be shown in later chapters of this work.

As that dialogue will show, this risk is pertinent for marginalised groups, whose exclusion from epistemic and institutional recognition may reinforce pre-existing structures of oppression and domination, leading to unjust conflict. Both Collins (2019), hooks (1984) and other prominent scholars such as Spivak (1988) highlight that without attention to standpoint and positionality, theories that treat all actors as entering the democratic arena on equal footing, risk reproducing epistemic domination. A democratic system that celebrates conflict without guiding normative judgment inadvertently risks reproducing domination under the guise of pluralism – worsened by agonism’s insufficient accounts of power and knowledge. Here, it is possible to clearly see the interrelated layers of these three core tensions.

Institutional critiques reinforce these concerns. Westphal (2013) and Mäntysalo et al. (2023) identify an “institutional deficit” or “gap” in agonistic theory. They argue, separately, that while agonistic democratic theory critiques formal institutions as operating as hegemonic closures – entities that close-off contestation by aiming to concretise power – it offers no roadmap for translating contestation into binding, regulatory policies. As such, it is justifiable to ask whether agonism can be institutionalised at all. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing democratic theory and meeting the needs of plural societies by managing social and political difference without reproducing domination. By failing to articulate normative or institutional safeguards, agonistic democracy risks elevating conflict as an abstract ideal while leaving real-world hierarchies and exclusions unaddressed. The next subsection of the paper will show, using the practical case study of the Grenfell Fire, how the continuation of these three interrelated tensions of agonistic theory – the celebration of conflict without attention to material power structures, epistemic domination or standards of justice - risks reproducing the domination that it aims to contest.

2.4 Limitations of Agonistic Democracy in Practice: The Grenfell Tower Fire

The Grenfell Tower fire in London in June 2017 offers a powerful diagnostic case for examining the weaknesses of agonistic democracy when structural inequalities and epistemic exclusions are left unaddressed. The purpose of this case study is not to claim that the institutionalisation of agonistic democracy necessarily produces catastrophe, but rather to highlight the limitations

of agonistic democracy and the imminent risks associated with the tensions explored in this chapter.

The Grenfell Tower fire was a fatal fire in a high-rise, social housing apartment building on June 14th 2017 in North Kensington, one of the wealthiest areas in England. The fire was the result of a faulty fridge-freezer which spread quickly through the flammable cladding material that was illegally installed for thermal insulation and attractive aesthetics, chosen to not offend the wealthy local residents (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2019). The 24-floor block burned for more than 24 hours, resulting in 72 deaths as a result of the failed “stay put” policy, ignored safety warnings and regulatory failures. (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2019).

The facts of the case support the core argument of this thesis that conflict and pluralism must be supplemented by reasonable attention to structural power, epistemology, and normative criteria if its democratic potential is to be realised – that is to say, if it is to accommodate inclusive, democratic pluralism without inflicting harm. The tragedy demonstrates how the absence of such safeguarding elements can contribute to institutional violence, profound injustice, and in this case, death.

From an agonistic perspective, conflict surrounding housing inequality, gentrification, and urban governance should be recognised as legitimate political contestation rather than dismissed as merely social grievances. In this light, the agonistic preservation of conflict was achieved as opposing parties exchanged conflicting opinions about the building’s fire safety. However, the Grenfell disaster shows how a framework that conceptualises politics primarily as symbolic struggle between parties, risks overlooking structurally entrenched forms of domination. As MacLeod (2018) points out, the fire occurred in one of the wealthiest boroughs in England, revealing stark spatial inequalities between social housing residents and their affluent neighbours. Residents, who were disproportionately of marginalised ethnicities, had repeatedly warned authorities about fire safety risks, yet their concerns were ignored – pointing to the epistemic domination that can result from the lack of attention to standpoint epistemology.

MacLeod interprets this not simply as a failure of discursive recognition but as the outcome of racialised inequality, privatisation, and deregulation embedded in urban governance. In this sense, bureaucratic and regulatory structures produced what can be described as institutional abandonment, insulating decision-makers from accountability while exposing residents to lethal risk (MacLeod, 2018). Residents possessed critical knowledge about the building’s safety based on their lived experience as tenants in public housing within an intensely unequal urban landscape. Yet this knowledge was systematically dismissed in favour of managerial expertise and cost-efficiency logics, a pattern consistent with the dynamics of neoliberal governance

(MacLeod, 2018). Drawing on the conception of standpoint epistemology, it is possible to conclude that residents' structural position provided them with an epistemic advantage in identifying safety risks that officials failed to recognise. Their exclusion reflects what can be seen as the marginalisation of situated knowledge in governance processes that privilege institutional expertise over lived experience. This exclusion can be recognised as democratic disavowal, or a participatory illusion, where participation exists formally but actors' voices remained politically ineffective (Tully, 2008).

Grenfell also exposes the problem of normative thinness within agonistic democracy. While agonism values pluralism and conflict, it provides limited criteria for judging whether competing hegemonic projects are just. The decisions that contributed to the Grenfell Fire disaster – namely, cost-cutting refurbishments, outsourced safety oversight, and the dismissal of tenant warnings – raise fundamental normative questions into the institutional procedures and governing standards that were observed. Here, it is possible to see the realisation of Erman's (2009) "warning" that not all political agreements shaped by power can be assumed as equally justified. Without clear normative standards and institutional safeguards, democratic contestation can coexist with systemic negligence and structural violence. In this sense, the case of the Grenfell Fire reveals how conflict alone cannot guarantee democratic legitimacy. The tragedy underscores the need for democratic frameworks capable of recognising structural inequality, epistemic injustice, and clear standards of justice in order to prevent domination and protect vulnerable communities, their knowledge and their lives.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This thesis chapter examined the theoretical foundations and limitations of agonistic democracy and its institutional articulation in agonistic pluralism. Section 2.2 traced the development of the framework from radical democracy ontology to Mouffe's formulation of agonistic pluralism. It highlighted how agonistic democracy responds to the paradox of liberal democracy by rejecting consensus-oriented models and reconceptualising conflict as a constitutive feature of democratic life. In doing so, the chapter demonstrated how agonistic theory provides a powerful defence of pluralism and reframes democratic politics as ongoing agonistic contestation between legitimate adversaries rather than antagonistic enemies.

Section 2.3 identified three key tensions central to this thesis: agonistic democracy's thin account of power and structural domination, limited engagement with epistemic positionality and democratic subject formation, and an under-specified normative core that celebrates conflict while offering few criteria for judging the justness of hegemonic projects. Section 2.4 illustrated these tensions through the case of the Grenfell Tower fire, demonstrating how the absence of safeguards addressing structural inequality, epistemic exclusion, and normative

standards of justice can enable democratic institutions to reproduce domination rather than contest it.

By identifying these tensions, this chapter establishes clearly the conceptual gap that underpins the thesis' central inquiry: how intersectional feminist theory can deepen agonistic democracy. The following chapter therefore examines how intersectional feminist theorists theorise power, epistemology, and normativity, in order to identify the ways these insights can deepen agonistic theory and contribute to reimagining democratic governance and sustainability as radical, justice-oriented projects.

Chapter 3: Intersectional Feminist Interventions: Power, Epistemic Subject Formation, and Normativity

3. 1 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter 2, the paper established the conceptual gap within which this thesis sits. It did so by first exploring the core architecture of agonistic democratic theory and then providing an expansive analysis on the three key tensions within agonistic theory that open the theoretical tension that the thesis responds to. Building on this, Chapter 3 addresses these tensions by exploring parallel insights from intersectional feminist theory, particularly the work of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks on in the three areas of tension. Far from offering a comprehensive overview of their entire intellectual portfolios, the chapter focuses on Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), and hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). It assesses how these specific texts theorise power, knowledge and epistemic subject formation, and democratic normativity in order to ascertain how intersectional feminist theory can deepen agonistic frameworks.

The chapter is structured around these three tensions. Section 3.2 examines how Collins and hooks conceptualise power, exploring how their respective concepts of the matrix of domination interlocking and systems of domination provide a more grounded account of the structural conditions within which democratic contestation occurs. Section 3.3 addresses knowledge and epistemic subject formation, analysing hooks' theorisation of the margin as a site of critical insight in order to understand how epistemic hierarchies shape democratic legitimacy, followed by Collins' institutionalisation of hooks' contributions through the articulation of a formal standpoint epistemology. Section 3.4 then considers normative standards and the ultimate goal of democracy, examining how their respective works can introduce clearer criteria for democratic justice through concepts such as collective liberation, ethics of care, and accountability to marginalised communities.

Across these sections, the chapter evaluates both the strengths and internal tensions of intersectional feminist contributions. It shows how the contributions of Collins and hooks can collectively deepen agonistic democracy in several ways: they provide an institutional lens that recognises power as multi-level and structurally regulated, introduce a clearer emphasis on the importance of situated knowledge and epistemic inclusion for organising how democratic subjects are legitimised, and establish a normative horizon of collective liberation and justice principle according to which democratic participation must be structurally equalised rather than formally declared. At the same time, it will show how intersectional feminist approaches can risk normative prescriptiveness and operational ambiguity, particularly regarding how principles such as centring the margins should be implemented in complex plural democracies.

This opens the ground for the thesis to show how agonistic democracy can, in return, offer insights that address these open questions. Agonistic democracy's emphasis on contestation, contingency, and the openness of political outcomes helps prevent democratic justice from becoming normatively closed or predetermined. Similarly, its understanding of coalition-building across difference highlights how democratic alliances must remain flexible and politically negotiated rather than fixed through predetermined moral hierarchies. Meanwhile, the transformation of enemies into adversaries helps to envision what democratic transformation may require.

This chapter therefore lays the foundation for the assertion that reading intersectional feminist theory alongside agonistic pluralism produces several important insights. First, power is best understood as hegemonic articulation operating within interlocking systems of domination. Second, democratic subject formation emerges as a contingent process of political articulation shaped by historically structured epistemic hierarchies, where structural conditions shape possibilities for voice while articulation determines how those positions are mobilised. Third, democracy should aim to reconfigure the arena of political contestation so that participation by marginalised groups is structurally enabled while political conflict remains preserved as a democratic resource. Chapter 4 will then bring the traditions and respective tensions into direct dialogue to show how these insights emerge.

3.2 Power: Matrix and Interlocking Systems in Intersectional Feminist Theories

3.2.1 Patricia Hill Collins: The Matrix of Domination

Collins theorises power as the operation of inherently multi-dimensional and interlocking forces, organised along axes such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation - constituting what she refers to as a matrix of domination (Collins, 1990). Understanding power through the conceptual tool of a matrix of domination, provides an analytical framework for understanding how interrelated systems of oppression and material difference intersect to construct specific

social realities and individual experiences. In this framework, these categories are not simply identity labels or additive variables, but mutually constitutive relations that organise social hierarchies and lived experiences. The matrix of domination names the patterned ways in which multiple systems of oppression are linked, producing specific configurations of privilege and subordination across time and place (Collins, 1990, 2019). Collins, a Black, female, scholar does not treat race, class and gender as separate strands that occasionally intersect. Instead, she insists that they co-produce one another in political, economic and cultural life (Collins, 1990). This orientation aligns with other intersectionality theorists such as Crenshaw (1989), who similarly argues that single-axis frameworks obscure how racism and sexism converge in Black women's lives, leading to what she formally called "Intersectionality theory".

In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) Collins first maps this matrix Collins argues that power is relational and recursive rather than purely top-down. She argues that structural inequalities shape cultural meanings and are reproduced through practices, so that power essentially loops and is stabilised by institutional patterns (2019). This contribution is strengthened by Collins' presentation of three levels through which power is experienced and exercised. She asserts that power operates on three mutually reinforcing levels – the personal biographical level, group/community and the systemic levels (1990, p224-225). At the micro level – the level of personal biography – power operates through individuals' lived experiences shaping personal biographies and constituting a combination of unique values, opportunities and emotions according to one's social location within intersecting structures (Collins, 1990). As Collins puts it, "no two individuals occupy the same social space; thus no two biographies are identical" (1990, p.224). This level functions to show how the matrix of domination informs individuals, their everyday consciousness and agency which can be used to explain why, for example, a woman may stay in an abusive relationship refusing opportunities to leave (1990, p.225).

The mid-level - group, or community level – provides the cultural context through which shared experiences and ideas essentially give meaning to individual biographies, for example through family and community. This level contains what Collins calls "thought models", employed for knowledge acquisition (1990, p.225). For understanding Collins' conceptualisation of power and its levels of operation, it is sufficient to say that this interpersonal level regulates power through everyday interactions, shaping credibility, authority and belonging. At the systemic level, power is exercised via channels of macro systems for example through legal, economic and state powers which distribute resources and opportunities (Collins, 1990. p225-226). These three levels, conceptualising the operative sites of power, provide critical analytical tools for conceiving of its multi-dimensionality in plural democracies and the ways in which power shapes distinct experiences.

Collins's matrix of domination overcomes limitations of democratic theories, like agonistic democracy that treat race, class and gender as discrete, comparable instances of discrimination. Rather than merely cataloguing their similarities and differences, the matrix illuminates the interconnections of these variables within a unified structure of power asymmetries (Collins, 1990, p.222). In Collins' words, the matrix convincingly "expands the focus of analysis [...] and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. Assuming that each system needs the others in order to function creates a distinct theoretical stance that stimulates the rethinking of basic social science concepts" (Collins, 1990, p.222). By recasting identity axes as components of one overarching matrix, the application of the framework extends beyond its original emphasis on African American women's experiences and can encompass matrices shaped by sexuality, religion, ability or age (Collins, 1990, p.222).

A further strength of Collins' contributions to the abstraction of power, lies in her depiction of power as more than only solely top-down coercion (Collins, 1990, pp.224-26). This disposition to bottom-up challenge is resonant with foundational ideas of radical democracy theory that theorise power as the temporary stabilisation hegemonic claims (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The layered theory proposed by Collins, conceives such challenge, or resistance, as a generative energy that she argues is evident in Black women's roles as mothers and community leaders by actively resisting the oppressive labels attributed to Black women in dominant discourse (Collins, 1990). Here, "power as energy can be fostered by creative acts of resistance" (Collins, 1990, p.222). Understanding power this way, invites nuance Mouffe's discursive constitution of identities through counter-hegemonic contestation and summons questions around differential access to conflict and resistance by highlighting the multiple ways in which power materialises.

Despite these expansions, there is an apparent risk within Collins' work of under-theorising the contingency of identity, presenting structures as mostly fixed and enduring rather than fluid or historically rupturable (Nash, 2019, pp.2-5). Jennifer C. Nash critiques this institutionalisation of intersectionality, where demands for methodological accuracy threaten to dilute the adaptable potential of the theory (Nash, 2019, p.3). Critics also note insufficient attention to class as a primary axis, rendering it secondary to race and gender (McNally, 2019). Methodologically, the framework's practice of standpoint epistemology, which privileges experiential expertise, faces accusations of particularism by scholars who contend that the theory's social analysis fragments society in small identity groups removing the possibility of solidarising or wider universality (Zack, 2005). Collins, however, counters this critique arguing that social location enhances rather than undermines objectivity (Collins, 1990, p.231). These

ideas are elaborated further in the upcoming Section 3.2 exploring epistemology and subject formation in more detail.

3.2.2 bell hooks: Interlocking Systems of Oppression

Similarly to Collins, hooks theorises power as multidimensional. However, hooks' work explicitly emphasises power as a dual concept, moving away from traditional conceptions of power. On the one hand, hooks asserts that power operates as a tool of domination, while on the other, it is a creative, life-affirming force (hooks, 1984). At the time of writing, hooks described society as largely consumed by the former - power as domination, exercised as a "right" by the most powerful to exert dominance over less powerful subjects (hooks, 1984). Importantly, hooks argues that in "Western" societies, more accurately referred to as the Global North in current scholarship, power is most often expressed through hierarchical rule and institutionalised authority (hooks, 1984).

This form of power exists within interlocking systems of oppression. Writing in the late 1990s, hooks' theory parallels Collins' matrix of domination by rejecting the idea that a single factor, such as gender or race, alone determines political experience. Instead, hooks argues that one's social and political fate emerges from a unique matrix of inextricably connected systems including race, class, gender, and institutional power that mutually reinforce one another. She frames this as "a political system of imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1984, p.xv). A defining feature of these systems is their inseparability - since oppression is mutually reinforced, no single system can be eradicated while others remain. This explains why women, while all subject to patriarchy, experience oppression differently depending on how it intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other structures. In this vein, hooks challenges feminist perspectives that posit a universal female experience of oppression, insisting that oppression is relational, embodied, and materially situated, shaped by the totality of social institutions and structures (1984).

Critically, hooks also emphasises the family as a site of socialisation into power hierarchies, where children learn to internalise domination (1984, p.37). In support of this, Hodge notes, "It is in this form of the family where most children first learn the meaning and practice of hierarchical, authoritarian rule...accept male supremacy and group oppression of women" (cited in hooks, 1984, p.37). Such early exposure to domination contributes to the reproduction of institutionalised oppression, as hierarchical norms are internalised and accepted in early life. Despite this more pessimistic theorisation of early and continuous domination, hooks also proposes a life-affirming dimension of power, drawing on feminist critiques such as Hartsock's work on the capacity for political agency (Hartsock, 1983). Here, power is understood as the ability to act, achieve goals, and cultivate strength and autonomy, independent of domination. This creative form of power is relational yet generative, emerging through accomplishment and

the exercise of internal capacity rather than through the subjugation of others (hooks, 1984, p.90). This presents an optimistic and liberatory possibility to gain power, independent of the need to subjugate others.

Overall, hooks' conceptualisation highlights the interconnected, material, and relational nature of oppression, offering critical insight into how power shapes democratic participation. By recognising both domination and creative potential, her framework opens a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which democratic engagement is possible and who is systematically excluded from it. Power as a life-affirming energy, is neither comparative nor competitive, providing a liberatory alternative to power as domination that does not require the oppression of others. This empowers historically marginalised groups to locate power internally, drawing agency from self-actualisation and satisfaction rather than coercion. In doing so, hooks positions power as a tool for critical transformation (Hooks, 1984, p. 84). This reconceptualisation challenges liberal-patriarchal models in which equality is pursued through competition or replication of hierarchical norms. By moving beyond domination as the primary metric of power, hooks provides a vision of emancipation grounded in self-determination, offering both a conceptual and strategic foundation for feminist and radical movements.

At the same time, the theorisation presents internal limitations. By emphasising internal, self-actualising power, hooks risks normative idealism, underplaying the structural, material, and coercive forces that constrain agency in political reality. Institutional domination, state violence, and entrenched hierarchies significantly limit the practical realisation of emancipatory power (O'Neill, 1998). Similarly, while her account of interlocking systems of oppression richly maps how race, gender, class, and institutional power intersect, it remains relatively abstract, providing limited detail on the specific mechanisms through which institutions structure relational power and constrain agency (Heywood and Drake, 1997). Like Collins, hooks emphasises patterns of domination as structurally entrenched, which can obscure the contingency and fluidity of power dynamics, reducing attention to how power relations shift over time or in response to political struggle.

Overall, hooks' work offers a critical foundation for understanding structural domination, intersectional dynamics, and embodied lived experience, particularly in relation to democratic participation and marginalisation. Its limitations, however, highlight a need for complementary theorisation: one that attends more systematically to institutional mechanisms, coercive forces, and normative frameworks to assess justice and practical political engagement (Fraser, 2013). In this sense, while hooks' contribution is theoretically rich, this thesis argues that reading her work alongside approaches that account for the contingency of power such as agonistic democracy, can help capture its complexities in political life.

Collins' matrix of domination and hooks' interlocking systems of oppression emphasise that power is relational, intersectional, and patterned across institutions, communities, and interpersonal relations. Separately, they highlight how race, gender, class, and institutional forces shape both marginalisation and agency, addressing a key conceptual gap in agonistic democracy by theorising how structural inequalities condition participation and visibility in democratic contestation. Yet both theorists share limitations: their relative under-attention to contingency and political articulation risks portraying domination and power as fixed rather than fluid, leaving the dynamics of transformation under-theorised. The next section turns to knowledge and epistemic subject formation, extending this analysis to understand how the theorists make sense of who is legitimised as a democratic subject.

3.3 Knowledge and Epistemic Subject Formation: Margins and Standpoints

3.3.1 bell hooks: Margins as Sites of Radical Knowledge

Closely connected her own ideas on power, the work of bell hooks, is rooted in an epistemological principle that marginality provides unique and holistic perspectives, offering critical insight into the limitations of political realities. Interestingly, hooks develops the concept of the "margin" as constituting "part of the whole but outside the main body" (1984, p.xvii). The margins, according to hooks, do not signify a resolved exclusion from central political arenas but rather a site of critical political insight, producing a diagnostic dual vision for those inhabiting them (1984, p.16). One layer of this dual vision exposes individuals to dominant ideologies - the authoritative values, institutional logics, and hegemonic structures that shape social and political circumstances (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Subjects at the margins develop sensitivity to these dominant forces as they are forced to survive within them.

The second layer reflects the contradictory lived experience of marginalised individuals, whose personal realities challenge claims of universality, neutrality, and fairness in the dominant social order (1984, p.16). Simultaneously attending to both the dominant *truth* of the center and their own *truth* at the margins, means that marginalised individuals acquire a form of critical epistemic clarity grounded in lived experience of domination (1984). To illustrate, hooks draws on her own upbringing as a Black girl in segregated Kentucky, United States of America (USA). Reflecting, she writes, "Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole" (1984, p.xvii). It is relevant to state here that, despite their origins in the USA, hooks and Collins' frameworks possess global applicability. Talpade Mohanty demonstrates this by adapting their theoretical frameworks to analyse how race, class, and gender intersect with imperialism in South Asian and Latin American contexts (Mohanty, 2003).

According to hooks, in revealing truths about the center, this marginal positionality exposes the limitations of white, middle-class feminist universalism (1984). In particular, it points to the limitations of theories that assume essentialist truths and lack proximity to the oppositional perspectives that force those at the margins to comprehend social relations and political realities more fully (1984, p. XVIII). Elaborating on this notion of marginal epistemic privilege, hooks argues that Black women occupy a “special vantage point” in their perspective especially because no group is positioned as their institutionalised “other,” (1984, p.16). For hooks, this allows Black women to perceive structures of domination without reproducing them, providing a somewhat privileged consciousness, heightening awareness of hegemonic structures, the tensions between margin and center, and the limitations of existing feminist theorisation (1984).

The call to move subjects “from margin to center”, which is the title of hooks’ 1984 work, represents both an epistemic and political imperative. It is a demand to restructure feminist theorisation around those most affected by domination (1984). As such, hooks seeks to reorder the hierarchy of knowledge, challenging the authority of ideas at the center to value the epistemic contributions of those at the margins (1984). In doing so, hooks highlights how standpoint, lived experience, and marginality can be leveraged to critique existing power structures and inform more inclusive, justice-oriented knowledge production. In so doing, she lays the foundations for a formalised standpoint epistemology, which she predicted would follow after her work.

hooks’ account of knowledge, marginality, and standpoint offers a powerful contribution to debates about epistemic subject formation and a question underpinning this thesis regarding who counts as a democratic subject. Drawing on Elizabeth Janeway’s notion of the “power to disbelieve”, hooks argues that marginalised actors possess a critical epistemic capacity to refuse the values and identities imposed by dominant institutions (cited in hooks, 1984, p.92). This refusal produces a form of critical consciousness grounded in the dual vision of the margins: awareness of dominant ideological frameworks alongside the contradictory realities of lived experience. In this sense, the margin becomes a site of knowledge production and political mobilisation, enabling actors to challenge hegemonic narratives that claim universality or neutrality. Through this call to action, hooks exposes the epistemic limits of liberal feminist frameworks that assume a common female oppression. Her work reveals how such claims often reproduce bourgeois, white, middle-class perspectives (hooks, 1984; Friedan, 1963). By centering race, class, and gender within feminist theory, hooks advances a critique of epistemic universalism, highlighting how such universal, liberation movements themselves may reproduce domination. This is an insight echoed by Audre Lorde’s warning that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, p. 112). In doing so, hooks grounds

theoretical authority in lived experience and material realities, challenging elitist assumptions that knowledge production belongs exclusively to academic or institutional actors. Her critique of the “ghettoization of knowledge” further exposes how marginalised perspectives are often reduced to experiential narratives rather than recognised as legitimate theory, reinforcing intellectual hierarchies that exclude subaltern voices (1984, p.xiv).

Alongside these strengths, hooks’ framework reveals important theoretical tensions concerning the ambition of democratic theory more broadly. While the call to move “from margin to center” powerfully inverts conventional hierarchies of knowledge, it offers limited institutional guidance on how epistemic authority might actually be redistributed within plural democratic systems. In practice, the technicalities behind the project of reordering epistemic hierarchies is not specified and begs questions about how democratic institutions can recognise marginal standpoints without reproducing tokenism or performative inclusion. This ambiguity resonates with Saba Mahmood’s critique of emancipatory democratic frameworks, which she argues often assume that empowerment can be achieved simply through recognition or voice, overlooking the institutional limits and complexities of political transformation. Similarly, Heywood and Drake (1997) caution that frameworks centred on marginal suffering can inadvertently moralise and idealise power, risking a romanticisation of oppression as a source of epistemic privilege. Read alongside Spivak’s, *Can the subaltern speak?* hooks’ model highlights issues of operational ambiguity around how marginal voices are mediated through institutions that may still constrain their articulation.

Thus, while hooks provides a compelling account of knowledge as resistance and foregrounds the epistemic contributions of marginalised subjects, her framework tends to treat domination and epistemic authority as relatively fixed, paying less attention to the contingent processes of political articulation through which knowledge becomes democratically authoritative. While this could be attributed to her contributions being relatively early in the lifecycle of intersectional scholarship, these tensions nonetheless reveal both the promise and limits of her approach. It powerfully expands the field of who may count as a democratic subject but leaves open the institutional mechanisms required to realise this transformation in practice, supporting the thesis’ case for being read alongside agonistic theory.

3.3.2 Collins: Black Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

As with intersectional feminist theory more broadly, Patricia Hill Collins’ study of epistemology provides a critical lens through which to understand power distributions in society. Notably, Collins also provides a formalised theory of standpoint epistemology that hooks anticipated would follow. For Collins, much like hooks, knowledge is never neutral but “particular”, shaped by and embedded within relations of power. Power operates in two key ways - it regulates credibility and authority, acting as a gatekeeper of legitimate knowledge, while also controlling

knowledge production and sustaining domination by naturalising social inequality (Collins, 1990; Collins, 2019). Collins' theory of knowledge therefore holds that epistemologies reflect the standpoint from which individuals and groups are situated (Collins, 1990, 2019). She writes, "the social location of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations shapes their experiences within and perspectives on the social world" (Collins, 2019, p. 44).

Dominant standpoints tend to reflect the perspectives of socially and politically powerful groups, becoming institutionalised through control over the academy, law, media, and the state (Collins, 1990). In this way, particular forms of knowledge are normalised and universalised, while others are dismissed as subjective or anecdotal – again analogous to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of hegemony. Standpoint epistemology exposes how occupying a particular social location can produce epistemic privilege, granting some actors authority while marginalising others whose knowledge is reduced to mere experience. To illustrate this difference between dominant knowledge and marginalised knowledge, Collins' uses the concept of the "outsider within" to describe the phenomenon of Black women whose proximity to dominance-reproducing institutions, such as academic, means she gains "insider knowledge" despite her outsider identity (1990, p.228).

Given this hierarchy of knowledge, Collins argues that lived experience is not purely anecdotal but epistemically significant (Collins, 1990). She asserts that marginalised positions generate distinctive forms of insight precisely because they emerge from the lived realities of domination. For Collins, lived experience constitutes not only "data" but also a criterion of meaning - a standard for evaluating truth against, that is grounded in material and social realities (Collins, 1990). In this sense, knowledge is always situated, and universality is not a prerequisite for epistemic validity. As Iris Marion Young similarly observes, individuals necessarily interpret public issues through perspectives shaped by their situated experiences and perceptions of social relations (Young, 1989, p. 256). Reclaiming standpoint therefore functions both as a methodological intervention and a political challenge to dominant epistemic hierarchies. Collins emphasises that partiality, rather than neutrality, is often the condition through which marginalised voices can be heard (Collins, 1990, p. 230).

Collins further grounds Black feminist epistemology in the historical position of Black women, who have frequently been treated as objects of knowledge rather than producers of it (Collins, 1990). She asserts that intersecting structures of racism, sexism, and class domination shape the conditions under which Black women's ideas are either suppressed or cultivated (Collins, 1990, 2019). As such, understanding the epistemology of Black women requires attention to the social context in which their knowledge has been produced.

Within this framework, knowledge production is inherently dialogical. Truth claims are evaluated not through detached objectivity but through collective validation within communities, where dialogue among differently situated actors tests and refines knowledge (Collins, 1990, 2019). Epistemic authority is thus collective rather than individual, emphasising shared processes of meaning-making rather than the authority of isolated experts. This process is guided by an ethic of accountability, in which knowledge is tied to responsibility toward the communities from which it emerges (Collins, 1990). Through this Afrocentric feminist epistemology, Collins reframes knowledge as a social, situated, and collective project, enabling marginalised groups to claim epistemic legitimacy and challenge dominant regimes of truth in ways that are both empowering and politically transformative.

Collins' theorisation of standpoint epistemology provides an important analytical framework for understanding how knowledge production sustains domination. She demonstrates how institutions regulate not only the circulation of information but also the allocation of epistemic credibility, determining which forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate. This insight directly addresses a weakness within agonistic democratic theory, which often assumes that social actors possess relatively equal access to information and therefore comparable opportunities to participate in counter-hegemonic contestation. Collins challenges this assumption by showing that epistemic authority is unevenly distributed and structured by intersecting power relations (Collins, 1990; Collins, 2019). In doing so, she rejects the myth of impartiality as the basis of credible knowledge and instead foregrounds lived experience as a legitimate epistemic resource.

This move has material implications for democratic subject formation. By recognising marginalised groups as experts in their own experiences, Collins reconfigures the relationship between knowledge and political legitimacy. Subjects who have historically been treated as objects of study are repositioned as producers of knowledge capable of challenging dominant narratives. In this sense, Black feminist epistemology expands the field of who can count as a democratic subject, revealing how epistemic hierarchies shape whose voices are heard and whose claims gain legitimacy in democratic discourse. By conceptualising truth as a collective and relational process, validated through dialogue among differently situated actors, Collins' framework offers a model of epistemic practice that resists the elitism often associated with technocratic expertise. In doing so, Collins builds on hooks' call to center the margins, providing an advanced systematic account of how marginal standpoints generate critical knowledge.

Still, the framework raises several theoretical tensions. One critique is the risk of standpoint epistemology of universalising the experiences and knowledge of Black women, potentially reproducing the essentialism it seeks to challenge (Harding, 1991). By emphasising shared social location as the basis of epistemic insight, the theory can appear to stabilise group

identities and experiences in ways that overlooks plurality, internal diversity and contingency (Mohanty, 2003). This tension mirrors broader critiques of communal epistemology regarding its applicability within heterogeneous contexts, where social identities and experiences may not translate into cohesive epistemic communities. Furthermore, while Collins convincingly demonstrates how epistemic hierarchies operate, her framework offers less guidance on how these hierarchies might be institutionally reconfigured within democratic systems.

Despite these limitations, by foregrounding the relationship between standpoint, epistemic authority, and democratic legitimacy, Collins' approach deepens understandings of how subjects become recognised as legitimate participants in democratic contestation and reveals the structural barriers that shape whose knowledge counts.

3.4 Normativity: Equity, Justice and Democratic Transformation

3.4.1 Collins: Ethics of Collective Empowerment as Social Justice Praxis

The third of this thesis' research questions concerns what democracy should ultimately aim for and how democratic projects ought to be evaluated. As elaborated in Chapter 2, agonistic democratic theory offers an important defence of contestation and pluralism, but its normative criteria often remain thin with limited guidance on solidarity, governance, and justice, particularly in contexts shaped by intersecting systems of domination. As a result, it is not clear how competing hegemonic projects should be judged or which democratic arrangements produce more just outcomes. Patricia Hill Collins' intersectional framework provides important normative resources for addressing this gap. Although Collins' work is often interpreted descriptively, particularly through her analysis of the matrix of domination, it advances a justice-oriented democratic ethic grounded in accountability, equity, and collective liberation. Collins herself emphasises that intersectionality is a "critical social theory in the making" that explicitly raises normative questions about justice and ethics (Collins, 2019, p.41). As she notes, "social justice constitutes another core construct that underlies intersectionality's critical inquiry", prompting reflection on the ethical responsibilities of both scholarship and political practice (Collins, 2019, p.47). From this perspective, a central democratic question arises - what would democratic institutions look like if organised around intersectional justice rather than merely abstract equality?

Collins' work suggests that the ultimate goal of democracy should be the dismantling of intersecting systems of oppression, including racism, patriarchy, and class domination (1990, 2019). Rather than evaluating democratic projects solely through formal measures of equality or procedural participation, she emphasises equitable outcomes through the substantive transformation of social relations and institutions so that those most harmed by domination are prioritised in processes of decision-making and justice (Collins 2019). This position resonates

with Iris Marion Young's argument that democratic justice requires recognising group difference and providing special mechanisms for the effective representation of marginalised voices, including forms of differentiated rights or distinct representation for oppressed groups (Young, 1990, p.39-40). The emphasis here, shifts democratic evaluation from abstract principles toward the material conditions and lived experiences of marginalised groups.

A second normative contribution lies in Collins' articulation of an ethic of care and accountability (1990). For Collins, knowledge production is tied to responsibility toward communities, meaning that intellectual and political practices must remain accountable to those whose lives are most affected by systems of power (Collins, 1990; Collins, 2000). This ethic of accountability expands democratic normativity beyond procedural fairness to include relational obligations, emphasising repair, recognition, and responsibility in the pursuit of justice. Finally, Collins advances a vision of collective liberation grounded in critical solidarity (1990, 2019). Such solidarity requires recognising how different forms of domination intersect and how struggles for justice must therefore be mutually reinforcing rather than competitive (Collins 1990, 2019). From this perspective, democratic projects should be judged not simply by whether they expand participation but by whether they foster coalitions capable of transforming oppressive social structures.

These contributions offer a substantive normative framework for democratic evaluation. By prioritising equity over the neutrality of formal equality, grounding politics in ethics of care and reflexive accountability, and orienting democratic struggle toward collective liberation, Collins provides clearer criteria for assessing democratic institutions and movements. In doing so, her work offers to deepen agonistic democratic theory, offering an orientation capable of addressing the structural injustices and intersecting oppressions that shape contemporary democratic life. Collins' normative vision requires individuals and institutions to remain critically aware of their own social location within intersecting relations of power, avoiding the "active ignorance" warned of by Dotson (2011). Such reflexivity enables what Collins later describes as "pivoting the center" - a democratic practice that prescribes marginalised perspectives and ideas to be not only centred but valued and evaluated on their own terms rather than measured against dominant norms (Collins, 1990). This adds normative depth to hooks' earlier call to reorient authority "from margin to center" and is supported by Brown's observation that democratic engagement requires the capacity to "center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison" (cited in Collins, 1990, p.232). This practice demands epistemic inclusion and expands the boundaries of democratic legitimacy by recognising marginalised actors as producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of institutional authority.

Collins' normative framework of knowledge and democratic subject formation is further grounded in an ethic of care and accountability in which she conceptualises care as a political and communal practice that challenges individualistic models of citizenship by prioritising communities (Collins, 1990). Care-centred politics therefore emphasise relational responsibility and collective wellbeing, offering a radical expansion of political subject formation by legitimatising formally depoliticised emotions and social occupations. Together, these ideas offer substantive criteria for evaluating democratic institutions by proposing that they should be reflexive, accountable, participatory, and structured to amplify marginalised knowledge to prevent elite capture of political discourse.

At the same time, Collins' framework generates several internal tensions. While her approach offers valuable normative substance for democratic theory, it risks normative closure (Harding, 1991). By prioritising the centralisation of intersecting margins as a guiding principle, the framework might appear to fix the moral orientation of democratic politics in advance, potentially limiting openness to contestation or evolving forms of political subjectivity, a tension addressed earlier. Moreover, Collins' reliance on institutional transformation introduces a practical tension. Although she critiques the role of institutions in reproducing domination, her vision of justice ultimately depends on those same institutions becoming reflexive and accountable guardians of intersectional justice (Fraser, 2008). This reliance raises questions about the feasibility of implementation for her ideas in complex democratic systems. Nevertheless, Collins' framework provides important remedial depth for theories such as agonism that lack clear criteria for justice, offering a normative vision that clarifies what democracy should aim for, while also exposing the challenges of translating intersectional justice into institutional practice.

3.4.2 hooks: Ending All Domination and Liberatory Politics from the Margins

Turning again to bell hooks for the final time in this chapter, it is evident that she also offers a powerful normative vision of democracy that moves beyond procedural models focused solely on managing conflict or securing formal participation. For hooks, the ultimate goal of a truly democratic society is the elimination of interlocking systems of domination, which she famously conceptualises as "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1984, p. 37). Democracy, in this sense, cannot be understood merely as a political procedure or institutional arrangement; rather, it must be oriented toward the structural transformation of society. As such, hooks endorses the call for a "reconstruction of the entire society for the benefit of the great majority and for the advancement of humanity" (Boggs and Boggs, 1974 cited in hooks, 1984, p. 91). Such a project demands not incremental reform but a radical reimagining of social relations, one in which freedom, justice, and peace become the standard principles of democratic life.

Central to this vision is hooks' rejection of single-axis approaches to oppression. Because systems of domination such as racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation are structurally interconnected, she argues that none can be effectively dismantled in isolation (Hooks, 1984). Attempts to prioritise one axis of oppression over others, such as claims within early feminist movements that sexism represents the primary form of social domination, risk producing what hooks describes as "competing concerns" that undermine solidaristic struggle (hooks, 1984, p.36). From this perspective, democratic progress should not be measured by whether particular groups gain limited rights or representation, but by the degree to which democratic institutions and social movements collectively dismantle systems of domination (hook, 1984). For hooks, democracy is therefore to be understood as a project of collective liberation, rather than the liberal pursuit of individual advancement within continually unequal social structures.

Despite hooks' emphasis on the importance of collective liberation, hooks fundamentally rejects political strategies based on shared victimhood. To support this rejection, she recalls how white, bourgeois feminists self-identified as victims and used this label to differentiate, distance, and devalue "strong" Black women as a transgression to their identity in vulnerable femininity (hooks, 1984 p.15). This argument is supported by the work of Maria Barrett (2010) who, comparatively, asserts that the trope of the "evil woman" is employed as a boundary marker for acceptable femininity, branding selected, transgressive women as "evil" and unfeminine as a mechanism of patriarchy. This reinforces the notion that constructed femininity prescribes particular, passive ideals for women to be awarded feminine credibility. As an alternative to victim-centred commonality, hooks calls for alliances to be organised around shared commitments to dismantling interlocking oppressions (hooks, 1984). hooks argues that political solidarity need not be grounded in identical experiences of oppression. Instead, individuals can unite through shared commitments to ending domination in all its forms. In her words, "We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression...We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs...united in our struggle to end sexist oppression" (hooks, 1984, p. 67).

A further normative contribution lies in hooks' insistence that democracy must center the margins, an idea explored in subsection 3.3.1. As explored in her epistemological work, those who inhabit marginalised positions often possess a dual vision of political reality, as they have to understand both the dominant ideological order and the contradictions revealed through their lived experiences of domination (hooks, 1984). This creates what hooks calls an "oppositional worldview", which enables marginalised actors to identify the limitations and exclusions embedded within dominant political frameworks (hooks, 1984). For this reason, she argues that those most affected by structures of domination should play a central role in shaping political agendas and democratic priorities. Centering the margins is therefore not

merely a matter of inclusion but is to be seen as a normative strategy for transforming democratic consciousness, enabling societies to confront the deeper structures that sustain injustice.

Finally, hooks emphasises that democratic theory and practice must remain accountable to the communities whose lives they affect (1984). Political engagement is thus understood as an ethical practice, requiring democratic actors and institutions to remain responsive to the lived realities of marginalised groups. Knowledge, theory, and policy should therefore be tested against the experiences of those most affected by domination, creating a form of democratic accountability grounded in community-based responsibility and reflexivity. In this way, hooks' normative vision reframes democracy not simply as a system for managing plural conflict, but as an ongoing ethical project of dismantling domination and cultivating collective freedom. This resonates with republican scholars who define freedom as not only freedom from having one's rights interfered with, but also freedom from domination (2011).

The normative framework offered by hooks makes a significant contribution to democratic theory, presenting standards that can clarify what democracy should aim to achieve beyond the management of conflict. Rather than conceiving democracy primarily as a procedural arena for competing interests, hooks grounds democratic normativity in an anti-domination ethic. This provides a clear normative benchmark for democratic justice and helps address a limitation within agonistic democratic theory, which often prioritises contestation without specifying which outcomes or arrangements should be considered more just.

At the same time, hooks' normative framework comprises critical limitations, which are largely not unique to its normative contributions but are more widely applicable within the theory. For instance, while the principle of centering the margins could be perceived as a corrective to historically exclusionary democratic institutions, it risks becoming normatively prescriptive. By prioritising marginal standpoints as the primary locus of democratic authority, the framework can seem to reorder political legitimacy in advance of contestation, potentially limiting the openness and contingency that plural democratic politics requires and that which agonistic democracy strongly advocates for. The tension surrounding hooks' limited procedural guidance and vague operational details, also applies here. Her emphasis on community accountability and grassroots transformation raises questions about how such practices can be scaled within large, plural democracies, with complex institutional structures. These tensions should not be understood as dismissals of hooks' contribution but rather as productive theoretical challenges. Her work offers a normatively rich anti-domination framework that clarifies what democracy ought to strive for. Yet, it also highlights institutional and operational questions that democratic theory must address. This thesis argues this can be achieved through a complementary reading with agonistic democratic theory.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter of the thesis examined how the work of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks can deepen agonistic theory and democratic theory more generally by exploring how their work addresses the three key areas of tension identified within agonistic democracy - the abstraction of power, the underdeveloped account of knowledge and epistemic subject formation, and the relative thinness of normativity. The chapter has shown that across these dimensions, intersectional feminist theory provides valuable, conceptual tools that clarify how democratic participation and legitimacy are structured by relations of domination and how they are to be transformatively reconfigured.

First, both Collins and hooks challenge agonistic theory's abstract treatment of power by situating it within interlocking systems of domination. Hooks' reconceptualisation of power as interlocking systems with both oppressive and anti-domination potential, alongside Collins' matrix of domination, demonstrates how structural inequalities shape who can meaningfully participate in democratic contestation. Second, their work enriches the understanding of knowledge and epistemic authority. Hooks' concept of margins as sites of critical insight and Collins' Black feminist epistemology foreground the importance of situated knowledge, lived experience, and dialogical validation. In doing so, they reveal how epistemic hierarchies determine whose voices gain legitimacy within democratic discourse, shaping democratic subject formation. Third, both thinkers introduce stronger normative criteria for democratic justice. Notwithstanding theoretical overlap, Hooks' emphasis on collective liberation, ethics of care, and the elimination of all systems of domination, together with Collins' focus on accountability, equity, and institutional reflexivity, provide clearer standards for evaluating democratic institutions and political projects. And significantly, Collins' work, develops the institutional implications of hooks' more ethically oriented vision. In these ways, intersectional feminist theory can deepen agonistic democracy.

At the same time though, the chapter has highlighted internal tensions within intersectional feminist theory, including tendencies toward normative prescriptiveness and operational ambiguity. These tensions highlight that intersectional feminist theory is not a "corrective" for agonistic democratic theory. To the contrary, contributions from agonistic theory - particularly its emphasis on contestation and the preservation of political conflict - remain essential for the project of democratic theory. As such, Chapter 4 will bring these traditions into a direct dialogue, illustrating how taken together, the theories offer a uniquely comprehensive account of democracy that is capable of addressing the central problem of accommodating difference without domination.

Chapter 4: Agonism and Intersectional Feminism in Dialogue: Toward a Deeper Account of Democracy

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter of the thesis reviewed contributions from Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks in the context of the three theoretical tensions arising within agonistic democracy. It explored the ways in which intersectional feminist frameworks navigate those said conceptual areas: namely power, epistemic subject formation, and normativity. A critical clarification and reminder must be made here, that Chapter 3 presented intersectional feminist interventions as ground to *deepen*, not *replace* agonistic theory. Importantly, it also revealed tensions within intersectional thought that open a gap for agonistic democracy to contribute. Chapter 4 addresses these conceptual tensions in both theories further, by bringing agonistic and intersectional feminist frameworks into direct dialogue. In doing so, it will examine how intersectional feminist contributions can deepen agonistic democratic theories, but also reveal how alongside one another, the theories, complement, challenge each other to advance the project of democratic theory.

Retaining the conceptual and structural backbone of the thesis, Section 4.2 begins the dialogue around the topic of power. It shows how agonistic democracy conceptualises power as relational, contingent, and discursively constructed, but risks flattening the differential experiences of race, gender, class other structural vulnerabilities. On the other hand, it shows how intersectional feminist theory highlights interlocking systems of domination, structural hierarchies, and the situated positions of marginalised groups. Subsequently, intersectional feminism can deepen agonistic theory by revealing the systemic constraints that shape possibilities for contestation, while agonistic theory maintains attention to relational and contingent dynamics, preventing normative closure. This section shows how by integrating these perspectives, the insight emerges that power is best understood as hegemonic articulation operating within interlocking systems of domination with implications. As such, this answers the first of three secondary research questions guiding this paper: how does power operate to affect who can participate in democratic contestation and under what conditions?

Section 4.3 examines knowledge and epistemic subject formation. It explores how agonistic democracy emphasises the contingent, politically constructed nature of collective identities and subjects, but under-theorises epistemic inequality. At the same time, intersectional feminist perspectives illuminate how socially situated actors possess an untapped epistemic privilege, offering critical insights into domination and inclusion, deepening agonistic perspectives. The dialogue here shows how a side-by-side reading of the frameworks, reveals that democratic subjects are not only politically emergent but epistemically situated, showing whose knowledge counts and whose perspectives are recognised for democratic legitimacy. This provides a

response to the second guiding research question that asks, who counts as a democratic subject, or constitutes “the people,” and whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate?

Section 4.4 addresses normativity and democratic justice. On this concern agonistic democracy ensures that pluralistic contestation is preserved, preventing the fixed hierarchies of moral closure that can emerge in over-prescriptive normative frameworks. Intersectional feminist theory on the other hand, provides normative substance, orienting democracy toward transformative justice and equity for those at intersecting margins, offering a standard by against which the justice of democratic agonism can be measured. Taken together, a critical insight and synthesis emerges: democracy should preserve pluralistic contestation while prioritising historically marginalised positions, structuring political struggle toward dismantling interlocking systems of oppression. With that, the third guiding research question - What should democracy aim for beyond managing conflict? - is answered.

Chapter 5 will then extend this synthesis through a practical application using two case studies to show how these combined theoretical insights can transform governance and sustainability into dynamic sites of radical, democratic, justice-oriented contestation.

4.2 Power: Hegemonic Contestation within Interlocking Systems of Domination

4.2.1 Revisiting Key Contributions: Power within Agonistic and Intersectional Frameworks

Agonistic democracy offers several important conceptual contributions for addressing the central challenge of democratic theory: how to accommodate difference and plurality while preventing domination. First, it challenges the liberal assumption that democratic stability can be achieved through rational consensus or neutral procedures. Instead, agonistic democracy posits that conflict is constitutive of the political (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). As such, it represents the idea that social orders are not coherent or fully reconciled wholes but rather, contingent arrangements produced through ongoing struggles over meaning and authority (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In agonistic theory, political identities also emerge relationally through processes of hegemonic articulation, in which actors differentiate themselves from others and construct collective, political projects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). By foregrounding contingency and articulation, agonistic democracy reframes democratic politics as an arena in which competing interpretations of social order are continuously contested (Connolly, 1991, pp.224-226).

A second contribution concerns the concept of hegemony, which reveals that every social order temporarily privileges particular identities, norms, and interests, while excluding others (Gramsci, 1971). Power is therefore not an anomaly within democracy but a constitutive condition of collective organisation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Because hegemonic arrangements are contingent, claims to universality can be exposed as politically constructed.

This insight enables marginalised groups to challenge exclusions by demonstrating that dominant arrangements are neither natural nor permanent (Honig, 1993). In this way, the contingency emphasised by agonistic theory helps address democracy's central problem by preventing difference from hardening into fixed hierarchies (Mouffe, 2000).

In addition, agonistic pluralism proposes the transformation of antagonism into agonism with great implications (Mouffe, 2000). Whereas antagonism constructs the "other" as an enemy to be eliminated, agonism redefines opponents as legitimate adversaries whose right to contest is recognised (Mouffe, 2000). This shift does not eliminate conflict but institutionalises it, allowing disagreement to occur within a shared democratic framework (Tully, 2008). Conflict thus becomes a regulated feature of democratic life rather than a threat to it, enabling plural societies to manage deep differences without suppressing dissent or resorting to violence. Finally, agonistic theory conceptualises power as relational and discursive, emerging through interactions, discourses, and institutions rather than existing as a possession held by particular actors. This perspective highlights the dynamic and shifting character of political struggle where all social spaces, from formal institutions to everyday social relations, become potential sites of hegemonic contestation.

Yet a central tension remains. By focusing primarily on discursive contestation and hegemonic articulation, agonistic frameworks risk flattening key differences in structural vulnerability levels. The theoretical foundation offers limited analysis of the ways that race, gender, colonial histories, and material institutions shape the conditions of democratic participation. As a result, the theory risks abstracting from the specific structures that regulate who can meaningfully engage in counter-hegemonic struggle, assuming democratic institutions operate as neutral arenas. This tension opens the framework to contributions from intersectional feminist theory, which provides a more grounded analysis of how structurally interlocked systems of domination shape democratic possibility.

It is now necessary to turn to the key contributions of intersectional feminist theory, and the specific lenses of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks. Against the backdrop of agonistic theory's conceptual gap, it becomes possible to conceive how their works can deepen agonistic understandings of power and strengthen its ability to address democracy's central challenge in plural democracies of eliminating domination. While agonistic theory reveals the contingent and contested nature of social orders, intersectional feminist scholarship demonstrates that power is not only discursive but also structurally patterned across social institutions and lived relations. Collins' concept of the matrix of domination conceptualises power as multidimensional, operating simultaneously across intersecting axes such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins, 1990). In this framework, power is embedded within institutions, cultural norms, and material arrangements, producing unequal access to resources, authority,

and recognition. By foregrounding the institutional organisation of power and the lived consequences of domination, Collins highlights how social hierarchies become sedimented and mutually reinforcing, rather than temporary effects of discourse alone (2019). This structural perspective clarifies how democratic participation itself is shaped by patterned inequalities that regulate whose voices are recognised and whose claims remain marginalised.

Similarly, hooks' account of interlocking systems of oppression emphasises the relational and systemic nature of power. For hooks, domination is reproduced through interconnected structures of race, gender, and class that shape both social institutions and everyday experiences (hooks, 1984). Power is therefore not only exercised through antagonistic struggle but also reproduced through patterned social relations that organise access to authority and belonging. By situating political conflict within these interdependent systems, hooks makes explicit how identities and social positions are co-constituted within broader structures of domination. This perspective, along with the conception of power as a life-affirming force that requires no competition or oppression, highlights the democratic stakes of exclusion. It shows that struggles for justice must address not only discursive contestation but also the material and institutional conditions that structure participation.

Together, Collins and hooks show that democratic power operates within interlocking systems of domination that structure the terrain on which political contestation unfolds. Their work therefore deepens agonistic theory by grounding hegemonic struggle within historically embedded inequalities that shape who can meaningfully participate in counter-hegemonic challenge. At the same time, intersectional feminist approaches risk undertheorising political articulation and contingency, often treating structures of domination as relatively stable rather than politically reconfigurable. In doing so, they offer less insight into how new democratic coalitions emerge or how hegemonic arrangements are transformed through contestation (Fraser, 2013). This tension opens a productive space for engagement with agonistic theory, whose emphasis on articulation, contingency, and coalition-building helps illuminate the political dynamics through which structural domination can be challenged and reconfigured.

4.2.2 Conceptual Dialogue: Power as Hegemonic Articulation within Interlocking Systems

Reading agonistic democracy alongside intersectional feminist theory reveals complementary yet distinct perspectives on power and democratic practice in a way that helps address the contemporary challenge of democratic theory - that is, how to accommodate difference and plurality while managing domination. Agonistic democracy's emphasis on the role of discursive hegemony, foregrounding the contingent construction of social orders through processes of political articulation frames political identities and social arrangements as never fully stabilised but continuously produced and contested through hegemonic struggle. By bringing this framework into dialogue with intersectional feminist positioning, it becomes possible to capture

the multiplicity of axes of oppression that structure the dynamics within which hegemonic contestation exists.

Agonist theory's central normative contribution lies in recognising conflict as constitutive of the political and in legitimising plural contestation within democratic boundaries. By reframing political opponents as adversaries rather than enemies, agonistic pluralism provides a model through which democratic conflict can theoretically begin to be institutionalised without collapsing into violence or exclusion (Mouffe, 1999). However, as the Grenfell Tower case study shows, the preservation and celebration of political conflict, without safeguards to protect political actors from erasure and elimination, bears serious consequences for the project of democracy (Mouffe, 2005). It is true that the transformation of antagonism into agonism goes some way in refining this normative gap, yet, a lack of attention to the colonial and material systems of power at play in social and political life, calls for clarifying intervention, which intersectional feminist theories offer (Lugones, 2008). This emphasis on discursive contestation can risk obscuring the differential proximities to structural vulnerability that shape democratic participation. While agonistic theory effectively exposes the contingency of hegemonic orders, it devotes less sustained attention to institutional inequalities that are less open to negotiation and contingency. In doing so, it veers away from theorising structures that determine who can engage in political life and under what conditions.

As a result, power can primarily appear a matter of discursive struggle rather than as something embedded within historically sedimented social relations and institutions. Intersectional feminist theory directly addresses this limitation by foregrounding the structural and patterned dimensions of domination. The work of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks provides a framework for understanding power as operating through interlocking systems of domination that structure social life across axes such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). Collins' concept of the matrix of domination demonstrates how these intersecting hierarchies are institutionalised within political, economic, and cultural structures, producing unequal access to resources, recognition, and authority. Power in this account is not merely discursive but materially organised and reproduced through institutions and everyday practices. Similarly, hooks' observation that domination operates through interconnected structures, describes as a system of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that influences access to participation (hooks, 1984). From this perspective, democratic conflict cannot solely be understood as a contest between articulated political projects. This is because it unfolds within social contexts already structured by persistent inequalities.

In this light, intersectional feminist theory deepens agonistic accounts of power by clarifying how structural hierarchies shape the terrain on which political contestation occurs, highlighting

that actors enter democratic struggles from unequal positions within historically constituted systems of domination. These inequalities influence whose voices are recognised as legitimate, whose grievances are heard, and whose political claims can gain traction. As Nancy Fraser argues, struggles for justice cannot be understood exclusively as discursive contests over recognition but must also address the institutional arrangements that produce systematic inequalities in participation and representation (2013). Intersectional analyses make these structural conditions visible, demonstrating that democratic contestation is always situated within broader patterns of social stratification.

But intersectional approaches also face their own theoretical tensions to which agonistic democracy can offer support. By emphasising the durability and patterned nature of domination, intersectional feminist theories can risk under-theorising the contingency and political articulation that enable social orders to be transformed (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Without the concept of political articulation and contingency, structures of domination appear overly stable, fixed or determining. With that, it becomes less clear how new political coalitions can emerge or hegemonic arrangements are reconfigured through struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Agonistic theory addresses this gap by highlighting the political processes through which collective identities are constructed and alliances are formed. Its emphasis on hegemonic articulation demonstrates how disparate social demands can be linked together into broader political projects capable of challenging existing power relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). As such, it illuminates the contingent and strategic dimension of democratic politics that intersectional frameworks sometimes leave implicit.

Reading these traditions together therefore allows theories of intersectionality to challenge and deepen agonistic frameworks and form a mutually consolidating reading of power. Agonistic democracy provides a dynamic account of how political conflict is articulated and institutionalised, while intersectional feminism grounds this process within the structured inequalities that shape democratic participation. Rather than replacing the concept of hegemony, Collins and hooks situate the concept, even when not named, within historically constituted matrices of domination that condition who can meaningfully engage in contestation. In this way, it is possible to conceive of political frontiers existing firmly within social landscapes already organised by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, gender, and colonial history.

From this dialogue, an insight emerges: power in democratic contexts is best conceptualised as hegemonic articulation operating within interlocking systems of domination. Contestation remains central to democratic life, but it unfolds within structural conditions that shape access to voice, legitimacy, and influence. Recognising this dual character of power as both contingent and structured, allows for a deeper diagnosis of democratic conditions. It clarifies that the question of how power shapes who can participate in conflict, and under what circumstances,

cannot be understood solely in terms of discursive contestation or structural positioning alone. Instead, democratic participation emerges through the interaction between historically sedimented inequalities and the political articulations that seek to challenge or transform them. By integrating the insights of agonistic and intersectional theory, democratic power can be understood as a dynamic process of hegemonic struggles which occur within structured matrices of domination. This synthesis provides a more robust framework for addressing democracy's central challenge and illuminates the persistent structures that shape whose voices can enter the democratic arena.

4.3 Democratic Subject Formation: Epistemic Hierarchies and Political Articulation

4.3.1 Revisiting Key Contributions: Knowledge and Democratic Subject Formation

Regarding the issue of knowledge creation and control, agonistic democracy offers a conceptualisation of democratic subject formation and legitimacy that challenges essentialist assumptions about who constitutes "the people". It treats political subjects not as pre-given social groups, but as being politically constructed through processes of articulation and contestation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2000). From this perspective, it is possible to see how collective identities emerge through struggles over meaning and representation, forming provisional alliances around shared political demands in the form of chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this sense, much like power and social order, the democratic subject is not fixed but contingent, produced through participation in hegemonic struggles (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). A related concept is that of collective identification, which enables actors to form temporary solidarities across differences in pursuit of shared political goals (Mouffe 2000). According to agonistic theorists, these collectives also remain unstable and revisable, reflecting the dynamic nature of political life (Mouffe, 2000). For them, political agency depends not on essential identity but on the capacity to articulate demands, mobilise support, and contest hegemonic arrangements. Such an account expands the possibilities for democratic inclusion by allowing heterogeneous groups to emerge as political actors through struggle rather than requiring them to fit predetermined categories.

Agonistic theory also carries important epistemic implications. By rejecting universal rational consensus and emphasising the political construction of knowledge claims, it exposes how appeals to neutrality or expertise can obscure relations of power (Mouffe 2000). Here, knowledge in democratic politics is mediated through contestation rather than grounded in an impartial standpoint and legitimacy arises through the ability to intervene in hegemonic debates and articulate alternative interpretations of social reality. But this account leaves an important conceptual gap. While agonistic theory clarifies how subjects and knowledge claims are politically articulated, it pays less attention to the epistemic hierarchies shaping whose knowledge is recognised as credible and who is afforded the information privilege to actually

articulate demands in hegemonic agonism. Feminist scholars show that epistemic authority is unevenly distributed across hierarchies of race, gender, and class (Spivak, 1988). Without addressing these patterned inequalities, agonistic theory risks assuming relatively equal access to contestation.

This opens the framework to intersectional feminist epistemology, particularly Collins and hooks' contributions through standpoint theory and the concept of centring the margins – both based on the assertion that marginalised positions generate epistemically privileged knowledge about domination and social order. Contributors from this framework provide a crucial lens for understanding knowledge, subjectivity, and democratic agency, particularly in revealing whose knowledge counts and how political authority is exercised. Patricia Hill Collins' concept of situated knowledge emphasises that knowledge emerges from specific social locations, shaped by intersecting axes of power including race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins, 1990). By identifying the outsider-within, marginalised actors who navigate dominant institutions while occupying subordinated positions, Collins also highlights the epistemic advantage of these perspectives, which allows insight into realities inaccessible to those in dominant positions. These perspectives reveal the structural epistemic conditions that constrain participation on the level of knowledge legitimacy.

bell hooks similarly underscores the epistemic significance of lived experience, arguing that the everyday realities of marginalised individuals constitute a critical resource for understanding oppression and shaping democratic praxis (hooks, 1984). She stresses that the personal and political are inseparable, and that experiences can be transformed into legitimate knowledge capable of informing ethical and transformative action. Collins and hooks both caution, however, that individual experiences must be collectively reflected upon and articulated to produce socially transformative knowledge, highlighting the role of dialogue and communal validation in epistemic production (Collins, 2019; hooks, 1984).

Together, these insights extend agonistic democracy by situating the contingency of democratic subjects within structured inequalities. While agonistic frameworks focus on emergent identities and the articulation of political contestation (Mouffe, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), intersectional feminism clarifies which actors are systematically marginalised and which knowledge claims are silenced. In this way, they operate at distinct, yet complementary, theoretical levels. Core concepts such as dual vision, oppositional epistemic privilege, and standpoint epistemology illustrate how marginalised actors possess unique capacities to perceive dominant logics and contest them effectively. However, tensions remain. Intersectional theory often undertheorises coalition-building across differences (Coleman, 2019) and offers limited guidance on how centring the margin can be operationalised in practice, leaving a gap for agonistic frameworks to provide mechanisms for engagement

between adversaries. The subsequent section will show how integrating these theories shows democratic subjects to be both politically emergent and epistemically situated, with implications for the ways in which power not only shapes who can participate but consequently determines whose knowledge is recognised. It also reveals how contestation can be structured ethically and inclusively.

4.3.2 Conceptual Dialogue: Epistemic Hierarchies and Political Articulation

Bringing agonistic democracy into dialogue with intersectional feminist theory reveals complementary strengths for understanding democratic subject formation, knowledge, and epistemic authority. Each tradition illuminates distinct dimensions of the democratic question concerning whose knowledge counts and who constitutes a legitimate democratic subject. At the same time, each conceptual offering leaves open important conceptual gaps that the other can help address – hence, intersectional feminist frameworks *can* deepen agonistic frameworks concerning understandings of epistemic subject formation, and is simultaneously reinforced by agonistic democratic foundations. Explored previously in this thesis, agonistic democracy emphasises the non-essentialist construction of political subjects whereby identities are not pre-given but are produced through processes of political articulation and contestation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2000). Collective identities such as “the people” therefore emerge through hegemonic struggles and legitimacy consequently arises from participation in agonistic contestation. This insight, tied closely to interrelated ideas of power, is crucial for plural democracies because it rejects the assumption popular within feminist frameworks, that the political community is defined in advance. Instead, it recognises the contingency of democratic subjects, articulated through conflict.

But as the paper illustrated in section 4.3.1, agonistic theory tends to under-theorise epistemic inequality. Without paying sufficient attention to the structural hierarchies that shape whose knowledge is recognised as credible, it appears to assume an idea of knowledge neutrality among social actors (Harding, 1991). Intersectional feminist theory addresses this by foregrounding the epistemic implications of social location. Collins and hooks both argue that knowledge is produced within historically structured relations of power, and that marginalised actors often possess distinctive insights into domination because of their location within intersecting systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 2000; hooks 1984). Collins’ concept of the outsider-within highlights how marginalised actors develop a form of “dual vision”, enabling them to perceive both dominant norms, and the contradictions revealed by their own lived experiences which challenge them. This position generates what Collins describes as oppositional knowledge which emerges as a critical standpoint that exposes forms of domination often invisible to those occupying dominant positions (2019).

Intersectional feminism therefore clarifies that democratic conflict unfolds within structured epistemic hierarchies that shape whose voices are heard and whose claims remain marginalised. Critically, these insights offer to deepen agonistic accounts of democratic contestation and subject formation by revealing that intellectual legitimacy for participation is never evenly distributed (Spivak, 1988). This shows that struggles for justice involve not only contestation over meaning but also struggles over who has standing to participate in the public sphere (Fraser, 2013). Moreover, these ideas show how marginalised standpoints can generate critical, experience-informed knowledge about social power as experiences at the margins expose contradictions within dominant institutions (Harding, 1991). From this perspective, it is possible to recognise the epistemic value of marginalised knowledge and the legitimatisation of experience, care and emotion as political claims. This radically expands the arena of expertise in a way that directly addresses the democratic problem of domination in the form of epistemic oppression which affect one's ability to own a political voice (Collins, 1990).

Again, intersectional feminist approaches also generate their own tensions. While they powerfully diagnose epistemic exclusion, they often offer less detailed accounts of how democratic coalitions are formed across difference or how marginalised knowledge becomes politically mobilised within broader democratic struggles. Aspirational calls therefore to “center the margins”, can remain conceptually powerful but institutionally vague. This raises questions about how such principles can be operationalised in large and plural political communities (Fraser, 2013). In other words, intersectional theory explains whose knowledge should matter, but is less explicit about the procedural dynamics through which marginalised perspectives enter democratic contestation.

Here, the resources of agonistic pluralism become particularly valuable. Mouffe's model of agonistic democracy conceptualises democratic engagement as a struggle between adversaries, where competing interpretations of justice and equality are articulated and contested within shared democratic institutions (Mouffe 2000). Therefore, while thin normativity constitutes one of the central tensions and limitations that this thesis claims in the agonistic framework, on the issue of epistemology, agonist contributions emerge as providing the procedural layer that intersectional feminist theories (including hooks and Collins) often leave implicit. That is to say, the call to center marginalised perspectives can be institutionalised through agonistic mechanisms that ensure those perspectives are able to enter, contest, and reshape hegemonic debates. Rather than assuming consensus or harmonious inclusion, agonistic pluralism recognises that marginalised knowledge will frequently challenge dominant interpretations and provoke conflict as a necessary condition for revealing hidden exclusions.

Against this backdrop, it is possible to see how read together, these frameworks present a powerful insight into democratic subject formation and epistemology on a normative and substantive level. Intersectional feminist theory shows that structures shape the conditions of possibility for political articulation, while agonistic democracy demonstrates how articulation shapes the political mobilisation and resignification of those structural positions. This points to the second key insight for this thesis: that democratic subjects are neither products pure of discursive challenge, nor determined by structural location alone. Instead, they emerge through an interaction between historically structured epistemic hierarchies and contingent processes of political articulation.

This synthesis clarifies whose knowledge counts by revealing how epistemic authority is shaped by structural inequalities while also remaining open to contestation and also, it clarifies who constitutes the democratic subject, showing that participation in democratic struggle depends both on social positioning and on the capacity to articulate political claims within agonistic arenas. This paper asserts that by integrating the epistemic insights of intersectional feminism with the procedural and political dynamics emphasised by agonistic pluralism, democratic theory gains a more robust account of how plural societies can recognise marginalised knowledge while preserving the conflict necessary for democratic transformation.

4.4 Democratic Normativity: Justice, Collective Liberation and the Preservation of Contestation

4.4.1 Revisiting Key Contributions: Normative Visions of Democratic Justice

Turning to the third major tension and question of this thesis concerning normativity offers additional, essential insights for addressing the core challenge of democratic theory. The thesis recognises that agonistic democracy and particularly Chantal Mouffe's formulation of agonistic pluralism contributes a foundational level of normative orientation by reframing the purpose of democracy as the preservation and regulation of contestation within plural societies (Mouffe, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Rather than seeking harmony through rational consensus, agonistic frameworks begin from the premise that deep disagreement is a permanent feature of political life. Thus, democracy cannot and should not aim to eliminate conflict as though symptomatic of failure, but must organise it to ensure mutual respect between adversaries' in competitions over visions of justice (Mouffe, 2000).

A secondary normative contribution lies in agonistic theory's commitment to pluralism. By rejecting the liberal ideal of rational consensus, agonistic democracy highlights the dangers of attempting to neutralise difference through supposedly universal standards of reason. It shows how the aspiration of consensus can obscure power relations and privilege particular norms as universally valid (Mouffe, 2000; Honig, 1993). Alternatively, agonistic pluralism emphasises the need for ethico-political principles between adversaries. In this way, opponents should not

be treated as enemies to be eradicated but as respected rivals who share a commitment to basic democratic principles like liberty and equality (Mouffe, 2000). Through this transformation of antagonism into agonism, Mouffe's theory offers a framework that appears to enable democratic institutions to sustain conflict without collapsing into violence or exclusion by institutionalising disagreement and protecting adversarial engagement. The framework seeks to prevent the closure of political debate and ensure that hegemonic order remains open to challenge. While its details remain unspecified, this hints to a normative, democratic aspiration which gives rise to a tension. This is because agonistic democracy does not provide a criteria for assessing whether hegemonic claims and conflicts are just or equitable. Beyond shared ethico-political principles, which themselves are underpinned by disagreement over the meaning, agonistic thought offers relatively little guidance for judging when democratic struggles reproduce domination (Fraser, 2013).

Following that, intersectional feminist theories make a decisive contribution to the normative question of what democracy should aim for beyond merely managing conflict. While agonistic democracy defends pluralism and the preservation of contestation (Mouffe, 2000), intersectional feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks insist that the orientation of that contestation matters. For them, justice cannot remain neutral, procedural, or formally symmetrical; it must be substantively directed toward ending domination (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). This reorients democratic normativity away from abstract equality toward equity over formal equality. It recognises that historically embedded systems of race, gender, class, and sexuality structure political life in profoundly unequal and encourage an understand that addressing this requires transformation, not simply reformation (Young, 1990). Formal equality assumes that subjects enter democratic contestation on level ground, yet intersectional analysis demonstrates that they do not. Equity is therefore a necessary, normative corrective, prioritising those positioned at intersecting margins, where the effects of interlocking systems of oppression are most acute (Collins, 2000).

Central to this vision is the principle of centring the margins, introduced by hooks (1984) and expanded by Collins (1990). Through the concept of the matrix of domination, Collins shows how power operates simultaneously across structural, institutional, and interpersonal domains, producing patterned inequalities rather than isolated disadvantages (Collins, 2000). Hooks similarly emphasises that the experiences of marginalised groups provide critical insight into how domination operates within everyday life (hooks, 1984). Importantly, both theorists stress that critical knowledge emerges through reflection, collective struggle, and political engagement. Nonetheless, the pledge to prioritise marginalised standpoints recognises that those situated at the crossroads of multiple subordinations possess distinctive insight into how domination is reproduced and sustained. Justice, informed by Collins and hooks, therefore

requires redistributing not only material resources but also political voice and epistemic authority. Accordingly, democracy must be oriented toward dismantling structural oppression, not simply managing competing claims.

4.4.2 Conceptual Dialogue: Collective Liberation and the Preservation of Contestation

Placing the contributions of Laclau, Mouffe, Collins, and hooks in direct conversation highlights a productive tension around the question of normativity in democratic theory. Agonistic democracy as articulated by Laclau and Mouffe, emphasises pluralism, the permanence of conflict, and the contingent construction of political subjects (1985). Rejecting the liberal aspiration to rational consensus, the framework asserts that democratic politics must remain an arena of ongoing contestation among legitimate adversaries (Mouffe, 2000). Its central normative insight is that democracy should not eliminate disagreement but preserve and institutionalise conflict in ways that keep hegemonic power open to challenge. In doing so, it prevents the risk of closure, that intersectional feminist theories are vulnerable to, and enables transforming antagonism into agonism. As such, this framework protects pluralism and guards against domination by ensuring that no social order can claim final legitimacy.

Yet, within this strength lies a limitation as while agonistic theory contributes a foundational account of how democratic conflict should be structured, it offers relatively thin guidance about the substantive orientation of democratic struggle (Mouffe, 2005). The preservation of contestation alone does not specify which political projects should be considered more just or how democratic actors should respond to entrenched structural inequalities. As a result, agonistic democracy risks appearing normatively indeterminate. This is because, if all hegemonic projects remain contestable, there is limited criteria for evaluating whether particular struggles advance justice or reproduce domination (Erman, 2009).

Addressing this requires intervention from intersectional feminist theory, particularly the work of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to deepen agonism's normative terrain. Collins and hooks' respective analyses foreground the ways in which interlocking systems of oppression particularly concerning race, gender, class, and sexuality, structure democratic participation and shape whose voices are heard (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). By centring intersecting margins, these intersectional feminist contributions challenge the assumption that democratic actors enter political contestation on equal footing. Instead, this theorisation shows that justice requires actively prioritising those most affected by structural domination, reconfiguring hierarchical social order and striving to dismantle these of intersecting structures of domination as a central democratic objective (Collins, 2000).

In this sense, intersectional feminism responds directly to the conceptual gap within agonistic theory concerning what democracy should aim for beyond conflict management. Rather than

evaluating democracy solely by the presence of pluralistic contestation, intersectional theorists argue that democratic politics should be oriented toward transformative justice (hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). This orientation introduces greater normative substance by shifting the focus from procedural equality to equity, recognising that historically marginalised groups require differentiated attention in political arenas if they are to participate meaningfully in democratic exchange.

But these contributions to enriching democratic theory are not unilateral given that intersectional feminist thought contains a tension too. Its normative commitment to centring intersecting margins risks generating a form of moral closure, alluded to earlier in this work. As a result, it establishes rather fixed hierarchies of moral authority and somewhat predetermined visions of justice (Harding, 1991). By identifying particular social locations as privileged sites of insight and political guidance, intersectional frameworks risk inadvertently narrowing the field for democratic contestation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). If the orientation of justice is treated as normatively settled in advance, the agonistic openness that allows democratic subjects to debate and reinterpret political goals becomes constrained.

This brings to light how, through direct dialogue, the insights of agonistic pluralism become significant as Mouffe's insistence that all hegemonic orders remain contingent and contestable reintroduces the centrality of maintaining pluralistic disagreement even within struggles oriented toward justice (Mouffe, 2000). Agonistic theory therefore functions as a counter-corrective to the risk of moral closure within intersectional frameworks, offering a reminder that democratic politics cannot rely on final or universally accepted moral foundations. Contrarily, even projects aimed at dismantling domination must remain open to contestation, reinterpretation, and political negotiation. In this sense, agonism supports intersectional commitments not by rejecting them, but by ensuring that the pursuit of justice itself remains politically contestable. Reading these traditions together thus produces a more robust account of democratic normativity than either offers alone. Intersectional feminist theory provides the substantive orientation that agonistic democracy often leaves implicit. At the same time, agonistic pluralism safeguards the pluralistic openness necessary to prevent this normative orientation from solidifying into rigid moral hierarchies that foreclose debate.

The analytical insight emerging from this dialogue and responding to the third guiding question of this paper therefore, is that democracy should aim to preserve pluralistic contestation while prioritising political actors located at the margins of political contestation and participation. Rather than treating these goals as contradictory, the synthesis reveals them to be mutually reinforcing and complementary. This thesis asserts that by addressing the internal tensions of its "opponent theory", each framework functions to deepen the other. Prioritising marginalised perspectives provides a normative compass for democratic struggle, ensuring that contestation

is oriented toward confronting domination. Meanwhile, the agonistic commitment to ongoing disagreement ensures that this orientation remains open to reinterpretation, negotiation, and political struggle. Together, these perspectives advance the broader challenge of democratic theory - how to accommodate difference while preventing domination. In this combined framework, democratic systems are centred on the preservation of open, political conflict while orienting toward the collective project of transformative justice.

4.5 Chapter Summary

Having brought the frameworks into direct dialogue in this way, Chapter 4 bridged a conceptual relationship between them, teasing out their productive tensions and showing how each addresses conceptual gaps embedded within the other. On power, it revealed that while agonistic theory highlights the relational and contingent construction of social orders, it under-theorises structural inequalities that constrain participation. At the same time, intersectional feminist insights clarify how interlocking systems of domination and historically marginalised positions shape who can engage in democratic contestation. It argues that while they are mutually reinforcing, intersectional feminist ideologies deepen agonist theory to produce the insight that power is best understood as hegemonic articulation operating within interlocking structures.

On knowledge and epistemic subject formation, the chapter showed that agonistic democracy emphasises politically emergent subjects and collective identities, yet underplays the epistemic hierarchies that govern whose perspectives are recognised as legitimate. Intersectional feminism on the other hand, with its focus on situated knowledge, dual vision, and epistemic privilege, deepens understandings of democratic subject formation. Taken, together the theories then clarify that democratic subjects are not only politically articulated but are epistemically situated where one's positionality influences whose knowledge guides contestation. On the conversation around normativity, this chapter has illustrated that while agonistic pluralism ensures pluralistic contestation is preserved which prevents normative closure, intersectional frameworks provide substantive guidance toward transformative justice and equity. It has shown how read together, the insight emerges that democracy should preserve pluralism while prioritising those at the margins, orienting political struggle toward dismantling interlocking systems of oppression.

In the next chapter, the thesis will develop these theoretical to show how this combined framework can be applied in practice. Through two case studies, it will reveal how agonistic and intersectional principles can transform sites of contestation, such as governance and sustainability, into justice-oriented projects, demonstrating the practical impact of a democratic project that manages plurality through managed conflict alongside the active pursuit of equity and anti-domination.

Chapter 5: Deepening Agonistic Democracy: Illustrations of Justice-Oriented Contestation

5.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 4 developed a theoretical dialogue between agonistic democratic theory and intersectional feminist theory, demonstrating each framework's conceptual contributions and limitations. The chapter argued that read together, the two approaches form a mutually reinforcing relationship - intersectionality deepens agonistic theory by revealing structural asymmetries, while agonism ensures that justice claims remain subject to open democratic contestation.

Developing this insight, Chapter 5 turns to two empirical illustrations: the Five X More campaign and the Ella Roberta Foundation. It shows that both case studies demonstrate how justice-oriented democratic action can emerge when intersectional analysis and pluralistic contestation operate together. In doing so, they prove that pluralism alone is insufficient without attention to intersectional inequality, while intersectionality alone cannot achieve democratic transformation without spaces of contestation. Building on the author's prior research into misogynoir³ within the UK's National Health Service, the first case study extends this empirical foundation to illuminate intersectionally-oriented contestation in response to disproportionately high Black maternal mortality rates. The second case study illustrates the latent potential of the mobilisation and radical transformation of Black, female grief into politically legitimate claims for accountability. Both cases illustrate how reading intersectionality theories alongside agonistic theories allows democracy to be understood as the combination of both radical, justice-oriented approaches to governance and sustainability via institutionalised preservation of agonistic contestation. As such, the chapter shows how through this combined theoretical lens, that the broader democratic challenge of accommodating difference without reproducing domination can be more effectively addressed, achieving justice also for those at the margins.

5.2 Case Study 1: Justice-Oriented Governance and Black Maternal Health – Five X More

5.2.1 Contextualising Structural Health Inequalities: Governance Failures in Black Maternal Care

In the United Kingdom (UK), Black women face disproportionately high levels of maternal healthcare risks. Black women are five times more likely to die during or immediately after childbirth than their white counterparts (MBRRACE-UK, 2025). A recent report published in 2025 by the UK Parliament declared maternity care for Black women as being in a “state of crisis” (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025). Recent research by the UK government has

³ Misogynoir refers to anti-Black misogyny specifically targeting Black women, combining racism and sexism in unique prejudice.

attributed these disproportionately morbid outcomes for Black mother to “systemic failings in leadership, training, data collection, and accountability” and a “failure to confront deep-rooted inequities” (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025, p. 1). Babies born to Black British parents face more than 50% increased risk of perinatal mortality (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025). A separate report published in 2025 by Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK (MBRRACE-UK) found that women living in the most socio-economically deprived areas face twice the risk of maternal mortality as those living in the least deprived areas (MBRRACE-UK, 2025). Crucially, socio-economic privilege does not shield Black women: high-earning Black women faced similar mortality risks to the poorest White women (MBRRACE-UK, 2025). Interestingly, this reality is not limited to British contexts but exists in global structures. In 2018, world-class athlete Serena Williams publicly shared her near-death birthing experience, calling for attention to the Black maternal mortality crisis (Bates, 2018) showing that wealth is not a safeguard against being Black, female and pregnant. This intersection of risk along race, gender, and class axes reveals the UK’s structural inequalities in maternal healthcare, where power asymmetries escalate vulnerabilities for medically precarious Black women.

The Five X More campaign, launched in response to the MBRRACE-UK’s findings that Black women face five times the maternal mortality risk, has amplified Black maternity experiences in the UK since 2018. By collecting testimonies from over 1,100 Black and mixed-heritage women (2018–2025), it exposed entrenched racism including dismissive attitudes toward pain, assumptions of greater “strength” and pain tolerance among Black women, poor communication, and the exhausting need for constant self-advocacy (Five x More, 2025). These patterns persist despite National Health Service (NHS) pledges for equity. Critically, research highlights how white-dominated clinical knowledge is in the field of maternity, with direct impact on epistemic access and representation. It has shown that 95% of midwifery educators are white, with only 12.7% of senior NHS managers from marginalised ethnic backgrounds. This leads to the prioritisation and normalisation of whiteness, regarding norms, diagnoses and care, as physical symptoms sometimes manifest differently in Black women which are not taught (Royal College of Midwives, 2023).

These realities embody Collins’ (2000) interlocking systems of oppression, where race, gender, and class mutually reinforce subordination, dispelling myths of universal womanhood (Collins, 2000). The statistics illustrate how these axes combine to heighten risks, with procedural neutrality failing to prevent domination. The NHS, despite its universalist ethos, perpetuates systemic racism. The government itself has deemed its inequities “unjust” (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025, p. 1). It is clear that as a result of structural domination and inequalities, Black women endure epistemic injustice. Their experiential expertise is dismissed as “mere

opinion,” while stereotypes of resilience lead to intrusive treatments and neglect (NHS Race and Health Observatory, n.d.). Research has shown that over time, this epistemic belittling fosters a “culture of silence,” where Black women cease self-advocating, and accept the entrenched subordination (Glover, 2021).

This crisis of misogynoir in the NHS (Anderson, 2023) directly reflects democratic theory’s challenge which must protect difference while preventing domination. The next section will show how, in response to such structural inequalities, contestation via campaigns like Five X More have successfully embody agonistic pluralism, while restructuring power to address inequities, moving beyond the incapacibilities of procedural neutrality to deliver justice.

5.2.2 Intersectional contestation and epistemic authority

The Five X More campaign powerfully illustrates how intersectional contestation that prioritises Black women's lived experiences as epistemic resources (hooks, 1984), reorders epistemic authority and positively reconfigures structural positionality toward justice and equity. By centring "outsider-within" perspectives, the campaign transforms margins into sites of radical democratic possibility, deepening agonism's preservation of conflict with substantive justice.

The Five X More campaign is a robust, community-led organisation founded in 2019 by Atinuke Awe and Clotilde Abe in direct response to Black maternal health disparities in the UK. It emerged from the founders' own traumatic personal experiences combined with the shocking findings of the 2018-19 MBRRACE-UK report, detailed in the previous section. Most notably the influencing statistic being that Black women are five times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth than white women (MBRRACE-UK, 2018). This initiative comprises a strong case study that illustrates the democratic potential of pairing intersectional feminism's justice-oriented principles with agonistic democracy's central commitment to preserving contestation in plural democracies. Five X More exemplifies a radical expansion of democratic contestation while intentionally transforming Black women's maternal health from a dismissible concern into a site of urgent, hyper-visible political struggle. In 2022, the campaign published its first Black Maternity Experiences Report, drawing on testimonies from over 1,100 Black and mixed-Black heritage women. In their own words, this was done to "shine a light on truths too often ignored... That report wasn't just data. It was a collective testimony that challenged the system to listen, and since then, we've seen real momentum begin to build" (Awe and Abe in Peter et al., 2025, p. 13). This indicates the intentionality with which the founders, two Black women, aimed to transform previously ignored personal “feelings” into politically legitimate facts.

In challenging institutional racism and epistemic domination, founders Awe and Abe positioned Black women as "experts by lived experience" within their campaign work (Peter et al., 2025,

p. 13). In doing so, they powerfully foreground marginalised perspectives in their work. This inclusion of perspectives is also seen in their language of "Black women and birthing people" which extends scope beyond cisgender femininity showing a radical centring of marginalised. This opens up a powerful epistemic and political reconfiguration of knowledge-power in Black healthcare governance debates, as per hooks' earlier calls (1984). The campaign grants epistemic privilege to Black birthing parents, managing structural positionality by reframing conversations to empower marginalised voices in shaping policy and holding governments accountable. These strategic moves reject the "Subject of the West" (white, male-centric medical standards) (Wynter, 2003), providing a strong case for experience as theory-generative. Five X More actively reinvents the margin as a site of possibility through critique of dominant hegemony, consistent with hooks' idea that theory emerges from the "wisdom of experience" (hooks, 1984). At the same time, it preserves radical democracy's counter-hegemonic articulations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), and Collins' standpoint epistemology (Collins, 2000).

The Five X More campaign has enabled Black women's voices to publicly and successfully demand policy changes from the UK Parliament, including reflexive accountability from medical educators and governors to Black mothers (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025). They called for mandatory cultural competency training co-produced with Black women as collaborators, adapted to local population needs, extending training scope and ensuring standardised, enforceable policies across NHS Trusts (UK Parliament, 2025). The Royal College of Midwives responded by designing a digital e-learning resource for cultural competency training, though enforcement remains with independent trusts and Baroness Merron (Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health) has not committed to mandating it broadly. Even so, the campaign forced Black women's demands into maternal healthcare governance debates which constitutes evidence of ongoing contestation in agonistic pluralism's spirit. Through collaboratively designed training demands, it ties knowledge production, epistemic credibility, and policy amendments to Collins' community justice outcomes (Collins, 2019). Campaigning has yielded public accountability in maternal healthcare discourse resulting in government admissions that NHS racism-countering "culture is not set right," (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025). Moreover, the campaign has triggered the establishment of seven NHS Race and Health Observatory "anti-racism principles," equitable leadership frameworks under Director Bola Owolabi, national probes into 10 high-risk maternity/neonatal units, and system-wide NHS maternity improvements (Health and Social Care Committee, 2025).

Five X More taps hooks' transformative "power as a life force" and Collins' resistance, reconfiguring political contestation to centre margins, granting epistemic authority to Black

mothers' lived experiences (hooks, 1984, Collins, 2019). It shifts the identities of Black women patients, from victims to campaigners, educators, and policy-shapers via counter-hegemonic articulation. In this way, the campaign practices the preservation of agonistic pluralism, deepened by intersectional insights, revealing “new” legitimate democratic subjects and mobilising their voices for inclusive, justice-oriented challenges to authority.

5.2.3 Normative Synthesis Equity within Pluralism

The Five X More campaign offers a compelling illustration of justice-oriented democratic practice grounded in intersectional feminism. Founded in response to the MBRRACE finding that Black women in the UK were five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth, the campaign transformed statistical disparity into organised political struggle. Rather than framing maternal mortality as an unfortunate anomaly within an otherwise neutral system, Five X More situates this disparity within structurally embedded racism, reframing Black maternal health as a site of urgent democratic contestation. In doing so, it demonstrates how radical, justice-oriented reform can emerge within pluralistic democratic politics.

Central to the campaign's approach is its intersectional positioning of justice. By centring the experiences of Black women and birthing people, Five X More foregrounds the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and institutional power that structures maternal healthcare via epistemic erasure and exclusion. Its Black Maternity Experiences Report (2022) functions as a form of collective testimony, elevating experiential knowledge to the level of policy-relevant evidence and positioning Black women as “experts by lived experience.” In line with intersectional feminist insights (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984), this move disrupts epistemic domination and challenges the authority of a historically white, male-centric medical norm. Knowledge production therefore becomes a tool of democratic intervention, demonstrating how marginalised social locations generate critical insight into systems of power.

This epistemic reconfiguration structures the campaign's political ambition around equity rather than formal equality. Formal equality would demand identical treatment within existing institutional arrangements, which, as discussed, are the very conditions facilitating such structural disparities. Five X More instead demands structural responsiveness. It calls for mandatory cultural competency training co-produced with Black women, locally adapted standards, and enforceable accountability mechanisms across NHS Trusts to recognise that identical treatment within unequal structures reproduces harm. As such, it makes successful demands for reflexivity and accountability to local communities. Driven by a standard of equity, the campaign requires differential attention to historically marginalised groups in response long-held cumulative disadvantages. By linking maternal mortality to racial bias, professional training, leadership representation, and institutional accountability, Five X More treats inequality as systemic and structurally embedded.

The direction of the campaign's work is therefore not simply inclusion within an existing system, but transformation of the structures that produce inequality. Its strategy integrates knowledge production, policy advocacy, and community mobilisation, demonstrating how political struggle can be oriented toward transformative justice. Taken together, the case is an example of the key normative insight of this thesis, in action- that is, democracy ought to preserve pluralistic contestation while prioritising those at intersecting margins, orienting political struggle toward dismantling structurally embedded systems of domination. By amplifying marginalised standpoints while engaging institutional structures, Five X More shows that equity-driven reform can deepen democratic pluralism rather than constrain it, transforming contestation into a vehicle for justice-oriented change.

5.3 Case Study 2: Environmental Justice and Intersectional Contestation in London's Air Pollution Struggles – The Ella Roberta Foundation

5.3.1 Contextualising Structural Harm: Air Pollution and Environmental Inequality in London

The second case study exhibiting intersectionality-infused agonism, explores takes the Ella Roberta Foundation as an example of sustainability being transformed into a site of radical, justice-oriented contestation, in its approach to addressing environmental injustice. Much like health injustice, explored in section 5.2, environmental injustice is prevalent in the UK and similarly manifests through structural inequalities that spatialise harm along race, class, and deprivation lines, mirroring health disparities (Mitchell and Dorling, 2003). Communities' environmental risks in the UK can be mapped against their position within the Collins' "matrix of domination" intersecting race, class, and gender axes perpetuating unequal exposure (Collins, 1990, pp. 221–38). Air pollution exemplifies this as UK studies confirm that harm is not randomly distributed but concentrated in deprived, racialised areas via planning regimes rooted in historical inequities (Mitchell and Dorling, 2014). London's structural geography reveals stark correlations between high deprivation indices, ethnic minority populations and elevated exposure to nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) - tiny airborne particles that enter deep into the lungs and can cause premature death (GLA, 2023). This is evident in boroughs like Lewisham, Newham, and Tower Hamlets with high populations of ethnically marginalised communities (GLA, 2023).

The Ella Roberta Foundation, founded by Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah after her daughter Ella's 2013 death, was created in response to this very intersection. Living 25 meters from one of London's busiest roads, in Lewisham, an area high populated with Black communities, Ella suffered a fatal asthma attack from excessive air pollution, becoming the world's first coroner ruling that explicitly linked cause of death to air quality (Coroner Barlow, 2020). Lewisham's illegal NO₂ levels, exceeded EU and World Health Organisation limits which correlate with the areas statistics of 28% deprivation rate and 40% Black/Asian residents (GLA, 2023). Similarly,

Newham, with 51% ethnic minorities and Tower Hamlets which has 35% Bangladeshi residents follow this pattern with high levels of exposure to unclean air (GLA, 2023).

In their research on environmental disparities in England and Germany, UCL and Imperial universities identified something called a "pollution penalty" (2025). This refers to the phenomenon whereby immigrants face three times higher exposure than white natives across England and Germany to unclean air (UCL and Imperial, 2025). The study showed that Bangladeshi, Caribbean, and African groups were the worst affected versus Global North migrants (2025). Critically, it showed that the phenomenon extends beyond initial migration, and that these communities remain "stuck" in toxic zones as a result of landlord discrimination that creates "red tape" around cleaner areas. In 2020 it was reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that Black people in England are almost four times as likely as White people to not have an outdoor space connected to their home (ONS 2025). that only (DEFRA, 2023). Agyeman and Evans (2004) synthesise environmental justice with sustainability, rejecting "green capitalism" for failing to address structural inequalities and racism in environmental harms. They argue that sustainable societies must ensure quality of life for all, "we recognize the integral connections between justice and equity" (Agyeman and Evans, 2004, p. 156). This principle demands policies avoid disproportionate harm to any one group, serving both community mobilisation and institutional standards.

The Institute of Health Equity (2024) confirms socioeconomic factors exacerbate health outcomes including poor air which, in London, increases childhood asthma 27-fold, hitting racialised and poor communities the hardest. Housing discrimination geographically segregates minorities into high-exposure urban cores, while city planning has clustered social housing near roads and industrial areas (Mitchell and Dorling, 2014). In the context of these structural inequalities, reproducing disproportionately high environmental risks to marginalised communities, the Ella Roberta Foundation campaigns for clean air rights, bidding to have recognised the ways in which structural domination, not random misfortune, compound environmental health crises. As such, it demands and embodies intersectional responses beyond neutral, procedural air quality measures.

5.3.2 Intersectional Contestation and epistemic Participation in the Clean Air Movement

Understanding the facts that paint the backdrop of the Ella Roberta Foundation, is crucial for recognising its work in environmental justice as an exemplary site of intersectional contestation within the struggle for sustainability justice. Ella Roberta Adoo-Kissi-Debrah was a Black child born in good health and living in South-East London. Shortly before her seventh birthday she was hospitalised with a chest infection that led to an asthma diagnosis, and in 2013 at nine years old she died from a fatal asthma attack. Ella and her mother lived just 25 metres from London's South Circular Road, one of the busiest traffic corridors in the city. In 2020, following

a second inquest, Ella became the first person in the world to have air pollution formally recorded as a cause of death.

The ruling marked a profound moment in the recognition of environmental injustice, acknowledging the death of a young Black girl as the consequence of structural environmental harm rather than an individual medical misfortune. Crucially, the ruling challenged embedded forms of epistemic control that frame public health conditions like asthma as private, apolitical issues, pointing to lifestyle failures rather than policy consequences (Dorfman et al. 2005). Such framing obscures the structural conditions that produce unequal exposure to environmental risk and intersectional feminist scholars have described these dynamics as epistemic violence, as marginalised communities are denied the knowledge, recognition, or authority necessary to challenge the conditions shaping their vulnerability (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, it marks a major political milestone, that through the Ella Roberta campaign, environmental harm against a Black child was transformed into a juridically legible injustice.

Central to this transformation was the work of Ella's mother, Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, whose campaign forced the reopening of the inquest into her daughter's death following her own independent research that revealed high levels of nitrogen dioxide the day Ella died. Collaborating with lawyers, medical experts and environmental advocates, Adoo-Kissi-Debrah built what agonistic theory would label a counter-hegemonic coalition capable of challenging institutional authority. The 2020 inquest ultimately ruled that Ella had "died of asthma contributed to by excessive air pollution," (Coroner Barlow, 2020). This moment of a Black mother's successful challenge against structural injustice, spatialised domination and environmental racism bears significance for the potential of intersectionally-positioned contestation.

Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's activism illustrates how marginalised actors can reconfigure epistemic authority within democratic politics. Her campaign politicised Black maternal grief as a form of resistance and agency. Rather than allowing her daughter's death to remain a private tragedy, she transformed personal grief into a public claim for political accountability. Through research, legal advocacy, and public campaigning, the Ella Roberta Foundation movement elevated embodied knowledge and lived experience as legitimate sources of political expertise. This reflects the intersectional insights of Collins (2000) and hooks (1984), who emphasise that marginalised social locations generate critical perspectives on structures of domination. In this case, embodied knowledge, grounded in the experience of living in heavily polluted conditions with unclean air, became the basis for challenging official narratives and demanding institutional reform.

The wider political consequences of the campaign illustrate how epistemic disruption via intersectional principles, can generate productive agonistic democratic conflict. The recognition of air pollution as a cause of death, contributed to a wave of policy responses, including the expansion of London's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) – a shift that has been highly contested by motorists, business groups, and political opponents. This contestation again points to the preservation rather than elimination of conflict through the Foundation's work. Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, acknowledged the depth of this conflictual opposition observing that, "the impression was given that everyone was against clean air" (Moffitt, 2023). The debates, legal actions, and policy disputes associated with the Foundation's influence in the clear air movement, demonstrate that democratic transformation does not require the elimination conflict but intensifies contestation over the meaning of justice.

From an intersectional perspective, this conflict reveals how environmental harm is structured by race, class, urban marginality, and health inequality. Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's leadership exemplifies what Collins (1990) describes as the "outsider-within" epistemic position, through which marginalised actors mobilise a dual vision of institutional norms and lived injustice. Her campaign transformed embodied grief into political agency, challenging state neglect and forcing institutions to recognise environmental harm as a matter of democratic responsibility.

The work of the Ella Roberta Foundation has resulted directly in policy reforms such as the proposed Clean Air (Human Rights) Bill ("Ella's Law"). This illustrates how this intersectional struggle has reshaped environmental and sustainability governance. These developments are not merely policy achievements but represent a reconfiguration of epistemic authority within democratic politics. Through sustained contestation, the campaign - led by a Black, grieving, mother in a socially-economically deprived part of London - has destabilised entrenched epistemic hierarchies and compelled institutions to respond to the embodied consequences of environmental injustice. In this light, the Ella Roberta campaign demonstrates how intersectional struggles from the political margins can transform environmental harm from a technical issue into a publicly recognised injustice, illustrating the role of epistemic participation and agonistic conflict in advancing sustainability as a justice-oriented project.

5.3.3 Normative Synthesis: Preserving Contestation, Prioritising Margins: Toward Justice-Oriented Environmental Governance

The campaign surrounding the death of Ella Roberta Adoo-Kissi-Debrah demonstrates why the insights of both intersectional feminist theory and agonistic democratic theory are necessary for understanding how democratic institutions can confront structurally embedded injustice while preserving pluralistic contestation. The structural distribution of air pollution in London reveals that environmental harm is not randomly dispersed but patterned through

historically sedimented relations of race, class and urban inequality. In London, racialised and economically marginalised communities experience a measurable “pollution penalty,” reflecting the unequal outcomes of urban planning, housing segregation and infrastructure placement (UCL and Imperial 2025).

The Ella Roberta campaign, led by Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, has translated these structural realities into a powerful public claim for environmental justice. By securing legal recognition that air pollution contributed to her daughter’s death, the campaign transformed environmental harm from a diffuse public health issue into a recognised injustice. Through lived experience, community knowledge and maternal grief, Adoo-Kissi-Debrah mobilised what Collins (2000) describes as the outsider-within epistemic advantage, challenging institutional narratives that had previously rendered such harms politically invisible. In doing so, the campaign foregrounded the intersectional conditions shaping environmental vulnerability and repositioned marginalised experience as a source of political authority in the clean air movement.

Significantly for this case, intersectional analysis alone would be insufficient as it does not determine how democratic conflict should be structured. At the same time, agonistic democratic theory emphasises the necessity of contestation but alone, would risk treating competing claims as formally symmetrical, overlooking the institutionally disadvantaged expertise that has shaped the Foundation’s success. The debates surrounding the expansion of London’s Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) illustrate this tension. Environmental advocates frame the policy as a response to structural injustice, while motorists, businesses and political actors mobilised opposition centred on cost and mobility. Therefore, it marks a site of productive and sustained conflict, with competing claims articulated through legal challenges, media campaigns and parliamentary debate.

Read together then, the two frameworks provide a crucial insight. Intersectionality clarifies asymmetries that structure democratic conflict, identifying those communities disproportionately exposed to harm and relocating them to the centre of political discourse. Agonism ensures that these justice claims remain subject to open contestation rather than technocratic closure. The Ella Roberta campaign exemplifies this synthesis as contestation continues in visible, ongoing disputes over clean air, while the political impetus for reform was triggered by the death of a Black child and the activism of a grieving Black mother. Seen in this light, the campaign preserves pluralistic disagreement while contesting structural asymmetries with equity-oriented values.

5.4 Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 translated the theoretical synthesis developed in earlier chapters into empirical analysis by examining the Five X More campaign and the Ella Roberta Foundation as examples of governance and sustainability functioning as radical, agonistic, justice-oriented democratic projects. Through these cases, the chapter demonstrated how struggles emerging from intersectionally marginalised positions have reshaped public debate, policy priorities, and institutional accountability. Both campaigns revealed that meaningful democratic transformation requires more than the presence of plural voices, as per agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2000), but also depends on recognising the structural asymmetries that shape who is exposed to harm and whose claims carry authority (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984).

At the same time, the cases illustrated the continued importance of democratic contestation. Policy responses such as reforms in maternity governance and debates surrounding clean air regulation have generated sustained disagreement among political actors, civil society groups, and affected communities. Rather than signalling democratic failure, these conflicts, productively institutionalised via coalition-building, show how agonistic engagement enables justice claims to enter institutional arenas and challenge established power relations.

Taken together, the case studies demonstrate that intersectionality and pluralism operate most effectively in combination. When democratic spaces remain open to contestation while prioritising the perspectives of those at intersecting margins, governance can move beyond managing disagreement toward actively confronting structurally embedded systems of domination.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Toward a Justice-Oriented Radical Democracy

This thesis set out to answer the question: How can intersectional feminist theory challenge or deepen agonistic democracy, and in doing so, reimagine governance and sustainability as radical, justice-oriented projects? It argued that reading the contributions of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau alongside the intersectional feminist insights of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks produces a productive theoretical dialogue. While agonistic democracy provides a powerful account of pluralistic conflict and hegemonic articulation, intersectional feminist theory supplies a structural and epistemic analysis of domination that clarifies how democratic conflict is shaped by historically embedded inequalities. By placing these traditions in direct dialogue, the thesis demonstrated that intersectional feminist theory can deepen agonistic democracy in three core ways, explicated below. The analysis developed across three conceptual dimensions which formed the structural backbone of the paper - power, epistemology and democratic subject formation, and normativity, each generating a unique insight that strengthens agonistic democratic theory. Collectively, these insights demonstrate

that radical democracy can move beyond procedural pluralism toward a more equity-oriented and justice-focused democratic project. In doing so, the paper showed how rather than constituting a corrective for agonistic theory, taking the theories together, intersectional feminist theory and agonistic democratic theory can produce a more robust radical democratic framework capable of addressing the central challenge of democratic theory – that is, how to accommodate pluralism while preventing domination.

The first insight concerns the conceptualisation of power. Agonistic democracy famously rejects essentialist understandings of social conflict, instead conceptualising political struggle as the contingent product of hegemonic articulation. For Mouffe and Laclau, social orders are not fixed but constructed through discursive struggles that temporarily stabilise meaning. While this framework provides a powerful account of political contingency and contestation, critics have noted that agonistic theory often treats hegemonic power at a relatively abstract level, leaving underexplored the structural dynamics that shape who is positioned within political conflicts. Intersectional feminist theory addresses this limitation by conceptualising power as interlocking systems of domination. Collins' and hooks' concepts of the matrix of domination and interlocking systems of oppression reveal how race, gender, class and other axes of inequality interact to structure the distribution of power and vulnerability within society. Bringing these perspectives together produces the first key insight of this thesis – that is, that agonistic conflict occurs *within* historically constructed matrices. Power should therefore be conceptualised as hegemonic articulation operating within interlocking systems of domination. In other words, while agonistic democracy explains how political conflicts emerge and evolve, intersectional feminism clarifies the structural terrain on which those conflicts occur. This synthesis enables a more grounded analysis of democratic contestation, revealing how struggles that appear pluralistic on the surface are often structured by historically sedimented inequalities.

The second insight concerns epistemology and democratic subject formation. Agonistic theory emphasises that political subjects are not pre-given but constructed through processes of political articulation. Collective identities such as “the people” emerge through discursive struggles that link disparate demands into temporary political formations. This insight remains one of agonistic democracy's most important contributions, highlighting the contingent and constructed nature of democratic subjects. However, the theory tends to assume that actors enter democratic contestation with relatively equal capacity to participate in a neutral arena. Intersectional feminist theory challenges this assumption by foregrounding standpoint epistemology and the unequal distribution of epistemic authority. Collins and hooks separately argue that knowledge is socially situated, and that individuals positioned at intersecting margins often possess distinctive insights into structures of domination. At the same time,

these actors frequently experience epistemic marginalisation, where their knowledge claims are dismissed or devalued within dominant institutions. Reading these perspectives alongside agonistic theory generates the second insight of this thesis: democratic subjects are not only politically articulated, but also epistemically situated. As such, democratic subject formation is best understood as contingent political articulation operating within historically structured epistemic hierarchies. This synthesis demonstrates that intersectional feminist theory helps to identify whose voices are systematically excluded from democratic contestation and why, while agonistic democracy explains how those voices can be politically mobilised to challenge hegemonic power. Together, the frameworks reveal that democratic conflict is not simply about competing interests but also about whose knowledge counts within political struggles.

The third insight concerns the question – of what democracy should aim for beyond managing conflict. Agonistic democracy deliberately resists substantive visions of the good society, prioritising instead the preservation of pluralistic contestation and the transformation of antagonism into legitimate conflict between democratic adversaries. This commitment to pluralism represents a crucial safeguard against authoritarian closure and ideological domination. Yet the theory's emphasis on procedural contestation can leave its normative commitments relatively thin, raising the question of how democratic societies should evaluate competing justice claims. On this point, intersectional feminist theory contributes a stronger normative orientation by insisting that democratic struggles must be evaluated in relation to their capacity to challenge systems of oppression and end all domination. Hooks and Collins argue that justice cannot be neutral in contexts marked by structural inequality; rather, democratic projects must actively seek to radically dismantle the interlocking systems that sustain domination. When read alongside agonistic democracy, these insights produce the third key contribution of this thesis: that democracy should reconfigure the arena for political contestation, prioritising participation by marginalised actors and ensure that contestation is preserved. In other words, democracy ought to preserve pluralistic contestation while prioritising those at intersecting margins, with an explicit focus on dismantling structurally embedded structures of domination. This formulation reconciles the apparent tension between pluralism and justice. It affirms that conflict and disagreement remain essential features of democratic life, while also recognising that democratic legitimacy requires attention to structural inequalities that determine the distribution of political benefits and advantage.

These theoretically enriched insights were then illustrated through two case studies that examined how intersectional feminist perspectives deepen agonistic democratic practice in the contexts of governance and sustainability. The first case study analysed the Five X More Campaign, a community-led initiative addressing racial disparities in maternal health in the United Kingdom. Emerging in response to evidence that Black maternal mortality rates are five

times higher than their white counterparts. The campaign mobilised the lived experiences of Black mothers to challenge institutional failures within the National Health Service. The analysis demonstrated how the campaign exemplifies the syntheses developed in this paper. Intersectional feminist insights informed the campaign's normative orientation, prioritising the voices and experiences of those most affected by systemic inequality. At the same time, the campaign operated within a pluralistic democratic environment characterised by ongoing contestation over policy responses and institutional accountability. By positioning Black women as experts by lived experience, the campaign challenged epistemic hierarchies that had historically marginalised their voices within healthcare governance while conserved political contestation and dispute. The result was a form of democratic engagement that preserved agonistic contestation while orienting political struggle toward structural reform.

The second case study examined the Ella Roberta Foundation and its environmental justice activism surrounding the death of Ella Kissi-Debrah, led by her mother Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah. This campaign highlighted the intersection of race, class and environmental inequality within urban governance and sustainability discourse. By successfully securing a legal recognition of "air pollution" as a contributing factor to Ella's death, the campaign transformed a personal tragedy and the emotion of a Black, grieving mother, into a broader political claim about environmental injustice. The ongoing debates surrounding air quality policy, including the expansion of London's Ultra Low Emission Zone, exemplify the maintenance of agonistic politics described by Mouffe through intense political disagreement. At the same time, intersectional analysis revealed how environmental harm disproportionately affects racialised and economically marginalised communities. The campaign therefore illustrates how justice-oriented activism from the margins can reshape democratic agendas, forcing accountable institutions to confront structural inequalities while preserving pluralistic conflict.

Taken together, the theoretical analysis and empirical case studies demonstrate that intersectional feminist theory and agonistic democracy are not competing frameworks but complementary perspectives operating at different analytical levels. Largely, intersectionality contributes a structural and normative orientation that clarifies the stakes of democratic struggles, while agonistic theory explains how those struggles can unfold within democratic institutions without collapsing into antagonistic exclusion. While the ways that intersectional feminist concepts deepening agonistic democracy have been made explicit, their combination produces a more comprehensive radical democratic theory capable of addressing contemporary challenges in governance and sustainability.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that reimagining democracy as a radical, justice-oriented project requires integrating the insights of both traditions. Agonistic democracy reminds us that pluralism and contestation are indispensable features of democratic life, while intersectional

feminism insists that democratic struggles must confront the structural inequalities that shape participation and outcomes. When brought together, these frameworks reveal that democratic justice cannot be neutral. Instead, democratic systems must be positioned to actively cultivate institutional spaces for conflict while orienting political struggle toward the dismantling of interlocking systems of oppression. In this sense, the synthesis developed in this thesis advances the broader project of democratic theory by demonstrating how pluralism and justice can be reconciled through an equity-oriented radical democracy. That is, a model of democracy that preserves contestation while prioritising historically marginalised actors at the centre of democratic transformation.

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