

Reflections on the Margins: Pre-Requisites for Coalition Building in Political Science

By

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bell hooks writes:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (2015).

As hooks problematizes this characterization of marginality and re-vision it as a place of resistance and opportunity for transformation of entire societies as well as “the other,” this paper offers Black women’s leadership struggles in Black churches, in the margins, as a basis for rethinking some aspects of the field of political science. My own studies, of Black women clergy

who have broken into the patriarchal leadership of Black churches provide insights for reflecting on the content, processes and means of bringing the margins to the center of political science. From this perspective, coalition building requires, as a prerequisite, enlarging space for the other, institutionalizing honest dialogue and building trust through consistent principled action.

In "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness," bell hooks continues advocating the ethical case for moving feminist theory to the center of culture and politics. hooks argues for decentering male dominated ideologies, devoid of the insights and real lived experiences of the majority of human society, those who live and die in the margins. Here in the margins, those whose own voices are rarely reflected in the political and economic decisions that determine their circumstances cannot claim to be heard even in the popular cultural renditions of themselves, in their own voices, but in the market and political representative's co-opted versions. Versions that further objectify the marginalized, essentializing their pain, in a perverse litany of pity and self-promotion.

The margins then represent a particular experience of dualism. Reminiscent of W.E.B. Dubois' double consciousness, wherein Blacks bear the burden of seeing themselves as they are in their own communities, but also as the world sees them through racist eyes. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Dubois (1903) writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks

on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (2-3).

Living a continuous dualism, abiding and at times embracing racist stereotypes and expectations, Black women are also struggling to live free and to be true to self in the realm of families, friends, communities and cultures. Parents live each day to instill in their children dreams for financial stability and mobility, good health, personal security and spiritual life, while also living in the world of the dominant culture which continuously dehumanizes Black males as thugs, exploits Black women's bodies and characterizes Black culture as illicit. Teachers aim to develop Black children's love of education while popular culture denigrates educational achievement in favor of capitalist gain at whatever cost. Lovers commit to be faithful but are so terrorized by homicidal police, preyed upon to entrap their own communities in plea bargain

deals, gentrified and left homeless, locked-down, diseased and violated, that any escape to momentary pleasure is all that seems possible.

Thus, Dubois' veil (1903), represents the danger of double consciousness, of the colonial condition. Such dualism threatens to either split a person in two, leaving the marginalized uncaring, devoid of ethics, in fact sociopaths. But more often the burden of knowing your own character and heart as well as your communities' but also knowing that the larger world sees you as inherently flawed, incapable, violent, increasingly dehumanized, has the potential to overwhelm knowledge of the truth of self. The veil worn to continuously seek approval, safety and supposed peace, wreaks havoc on the psyche. The veil doesn't threaten the powerful, yet it becomes a persistent and heavy burden precisely because returning to the margins awakens the marginalized to the truth of themselves. It's the veiling and unveiling, the knowing and denying that overwhelms. So the great danger is to stop unveiling and denying the dominant culture's view of yourself. The danger is that the veil becomes permanent, and it indelibly impresses the personality. What remains is a mere shell of the self, a caricature, one incapable of empowerment and liberation, indeed rationally opposed to them, but tremendously effective in reassuring and stabilizing the status quo.

hooks' wise insight, however, is that the very same margins that are the reservoir of individual and collective pain are also the site of wellsprings of resistance. Those who reside and are accepted in the center are most susceptible to the dominant narrative, pressured to at least give lip service to it, without substantive proof otherwise. Yet, in the margins the marginalized

live the proof from day to day. Their lived experience affords them insight denied those who lack it. The marginalized live the contradictions, hypocrisy and lies that are the underbelly of the proud systems that marginalize them to afford their prestige and luxuries.

These experiences of marginalization, hooks argues, have the potential to expose the truth of the center and its power. The critiques, numerous accounts of injustice, creative plans, strategies and tactics to avoid and resist the snares of the center, provide a foundation of knowledge, counter epistemologies and ideologies, that are the substance of survival and resistance in the margins. This counter narrative can revitalize and empower when a seemingly "normal injustice" exposes the absurd in glaring, unrelenting terms. An elderly woman is arrested for sitting on a bus after a long day's work; a young boy is "justifiably" murdered when his attire deems him unworthy of his middle class neighborhood; and police are routinely exonerated for shooting and killing unarmed pedestrians and traffic violators. The sheer absurdity of conditions, already a fact of the collective subconscious of the marginalized, erupts into conscious, passionate action. The absurd power and profit entanglements that subjugate the marginalized once exposed beyond the margins, disrupt the security and stability of those whose narratives they challenge. Whether the response is denial, subterfuge and counter-attack or meaningful change, once this volcano erupts it will always have the potential to do so again.

Black women in the US as well as most of the world are the marginalized of the marginalized. They bear the physical and psychological devastation of living three versions of themselves, as the dominant culture exploits them, as the powerful in their communities entrap them, and as

they retain whatever vestiges of their own character and dreams still exist. Black women are among the most poor, the most sick, the most abused, the most homeless, the most parents of murdered children, murdering children and if they are Black trans women, they are the most murdered. Yet, Black women are also, in spite of and perhaps because of all of this, among the most resilient. They stay in the civil rights organizations and houses of prayer and worship that circumscribe their contributions, they graduate from college, are employed and sustain careers more than their brothers, husbands and sons, yet they are paid the least. They raise the children, orphaned by disease, prison and wars - on drugs, for drugs, for trade and for the drug trade, mothering from teenage to senior citizens. They are the most consistent worshippers and servers in churches, mosques and temples. They vote the most in their communities and organize their communities the most but hold the fewest electoral offices. Extending the Dubois-hooks typology, then, Black women must have triple consciousness. And they are, thus, at tremendous risk of physical illness, mental illness, self-loathing and simply submitting themselves to others, other's images and voices. Yet, Black women's experiences of marginalization also provide intersectional awareness of the varied and layered contradictions of contemporary life and incalculable real-life data to verify them.

What then can we learn from the experiences of Black women de-centering power that might provide insight to building coalitions to diversify political science? A 2012 study (Ngunjiri, Gramby-Sobukwe and Gegner) of Black clergy women of various U.S. denominations and cities, identified strategies Black women have historically used and continue to adapt to shatter the stained glass ceiling that persistently threatens their ministries. Their experiences suggest

insightful considerations for coalition building as a means of diversifying the field of political science.

Historically, most Black preaching women were forced to become mavericks. Black women desired to serve in local church ministry; however, for most, their attempts to serve in leadership roles were categorically denied (Riggs, 1997). This did not stop Black women from working in the church, however. Some contented themselves to sponsoring events that raised money for the churches, and others became missionaries. Though they tried to preach in the church, opposition would force many other Black women from the church. Some became itinerant preachers, others missionaries, some even started their own congregations. Still others established and worked through community organizations.

Thirty-one Black clergy women, from various denominational backgrounds, responded to the 2012 open-ended survey posted online as well as focus groups in Philadelphia and Memphis, TN. Like their predecessors, many of these Black women have been a part of serving God and serving others through the church, and where this was not possible, their ordination is denied or forever delayed in some denominations and they too served as itinerant preachers and evangelists. But the indignities do not stop there. As pastors and licensed ministers invited to preach in many Black churches for Mothers' and Women's Day, Black women are often required to preach from the floor, rather than the pulpit. In the survey, women indicated that although resistance to their ministry leadership came from both men and women, sometimes the

resistance comes from the least expected source – other women ministers and generally women were the most vocal in resisting female leadership.

Given this often comprehensive resistance to their presence and voice, contemporary Black women ministers respond by bending, breaking out and bypassing the Black Church. Bending represents quiet resistance. Black clergy women who continue to work within the confines of the male authority in their churches, attempt to slowly bend the boundaries, rocking the boat from within while being careful not to fall out. They often agreeing to speak from the floor instead of the pulpit, or minister only after the male preacher has preached, some women continue to gently and when the opportunity presents, challenge the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This quiet resistance (Meyerson and Scully 1995 is expected to demonstrate to the congregation and the church hierarchy that women are effective ministers, indeed worthy of participation.

Black clergy women who break out practice overt resistance, such as a refusal to accept preaching engagements in churches that will not allow them to preach from the pulpit. They consciously resist subjugation and demand equal treatment with male colleagues. This practice began, historically, when women preached, sometimes secretly, to other women in camp meetings, or they held meetings in their own homes. Contemporary examples of breaking out involve Black women preachers leaving a church or denomination that is not supportive to join and work in a church willing to accept them. In many instances, women leave their denominations, as have women interviewed for this study, who left the Southern Baptists who will not ordain women, and joined the United Church of Christ or the Disciples of Christ,

denominations where they can be ordained, preach from the pulpit and not be limited by gender. Black women also break out of the confines of the Black church by serving outside of the church – as university chaplains, as hospital chaplains, and in other religious institutions. In this way, Black women redefine what it means to be a ‘minister,’ refusing to be limited by the traditionalist understanding of ministry only existing within the church, and recognizing that there is even more to be done outside of those concrete walls. They turn the personal threat of being limited within the church, into an opportunity to lead in other organizations.

Finally, Black clergy women circumvent the stained glass ceiling by finding ways to overcome the barriers placed in their way and live up to the callings they receive from God. A typical means of circumventing the stained glass ceiling involves women preachers starting their own congregations. One of the clergy women described how she left a church and formed her own congregation under the Disciples of Christ denomination, where she is the senior pastor. In this environment, she does not have to deal with some of the limiting barriers placed against women; now she has the opportunity to help others break the stained glass ceiling as a role model and mentor.

The narrative which emerges from black clergy women, of finding a way, in unwelcoming territory, emphasizes the need for the marginalized to be able to stand and speak on their own terms. In political science, among women in particular, three lessons emerge from these reflections.

First, epistemology is critical. It's no surprise that the most fundamental opposition Black preaching women face has and continues to be resistance to their licensing and ordination. Granted legitimacy to preach the gospel, Black women have the potential to re-shape theology and give voice within it to the realities of others like them. Speaking in their own voice alone is not enough, that voice must be acknowledged and recognized as valuable if the margins and the center are to be transformed.

In political science, the "canon" of our field remains masculine and patriarchal. A survey of leading political theory and philosophy texts indicates that women are barely 1% of authors included and women of color are notably absent in most cases. This condition is not only a matter of representing those omitted. It is further about legitimizing their voice and transforming through their contributions our assessment of the fundamentals of the discipline. Women and male allies in political science must become the active advocates, in their own works, doctoral advising, choice of texts and reading materials, include and analyze the works of women, women of color and LGBTQ women. Moreover, this inclusion need provide a basis for critiquing the existing political science narrative to enlarge and transform the discipline to reflect the reality of our complex existence.

Second, making space for the marginalized involves not only inviting them in but supporting their need for separate spaces. The experiences of Black clergy women resonate with the experience of the marginalized in academe. We often work in isolation as our voices are not valued but also because double consciousness leaves many of us torn between whether to

enlarge the discipline through our own voices and texts or to safely ground ourselves in the traditional literature and methods of our disciplines to ensure tenure and promotion. Most important, which ever path we choose, too often we become critical of those who have chosen the alternative course, just as women are often the most vocal opponents of female clergy. Yet, the black women clergy who have found the most freedom to express themselves, impact other women and influence theology, are those who find support among other women and like-minded allies. Just as clergy women preach to other women, form support groups with other preacher women and both mentor and allow themselves to be mentored by women and men who recognize and support their value, the marginalized in political science need be willing and supported by allies in choosing their own supportive and nurturing spaces on their own terms.

For Black women and anyone in the margins, hooks and Dubois suggest that their life experiences, knowledge and gifts not only have equal value to others, but they represent unique perspective that has the potential to produce dramatic change. Yet, change is not always desired and often the marginalized must fight to make their perspectives heard and understood. If societies, communities, churches, and even the discipline of political science are to benefit from the experiences and knowledge of the marginalized, diversification and coalition building must not be seen as ends in themselves, rather means of decentering to make room for the margins. Building trust, where is has not existed, is fundamental. Potential coalition partners build trust by proactively seeking and supporting means of changing the narrative, making space for and respecting the space requirements of the marginalized. This kind of collaboration

changes the dynamic of relationships and knowledge, providing the basis for genuine collaboration and diversity.

Works Cited:

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