

## **The Margin as a Space for Reflection, Thought, and Possibility in Academia**

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### **Introduction**

On December 15, 2021, beloved radical feminist, esteemed scholar, and academic innovator bell hooks transitioned to take her place among the eternal ancestors. hooks' passing brought forth a time of mourning for so many as her words of wisdom provided comfort. Although she is no longer physically here, her work continues to critique society through the many interviews she has conducted, a plethora of publications, and, the now ever-important, bell hooks institute. She will forever be known for her legacy of challenging individuals from all backgrounds to rethink who benefits from systems built on Imperialist-White-Supremacist-Capitalist-Patriarchy (hooks, 2004, p. 17), and how these systems in turn marginalize others. hooks (1984) writes that, "to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (p. xvi). The margin is thus many things while still being the same. It is a space and place where individuals are seen but not heard, acknowledged, but not recognized, and given a voice, but not allowed to speak. hooks openly discussed her life on the margin and how it was this place of honor and recognition that continued to drive her insistence to critically examine the location politics of centers and margins as sites of reflection, thought, and possibility.

### **The Margin as a Place of Reflection**

In her book *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), hooks commented that "in this society, power is commonly equated with domination and control over people or things" (p. 83). Historically, minoritized individuals have felt the brunt of domination and control in pursuits of acquiring and maintaining societal power while also seeking to reclaim power in fights for justice and equality. The American Civil Rights Movement, the Liberation Movement in South Africa, and most recently the Arab Spring in the Middle East show that through

reclaiming power, socio-political progress can occur. In reclaiming one's power, which is often needed in pursuits of domination and control, it is of the utmost importance to identify and eliminate existing barriers in order to create systemic and sustainable change.

Friere (1970) defines praxis as the “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). This term is commonly used in education as a way to describe what individuals do in the classroom to better conditions for increasing student learning and achievement. Hence, discussions of the margin in education are long and broad. A focus on examining the systemic barriers that marginalized populations face within institutions of higher learning provides a specific context for reflecting on and understanding this issue.

### **The Margin as a Place of Thought**

In shifting the focus toward institutions of higher learning, colleges and universities throughout the world have historically operated as Eurocentric, male-dominated, and elitist systems created to maintain existing power structures (Bennett, 1988; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987). However, throughout the 21st century, as society has changed its perspective on the necessity of a college degree, it also has changed its views on who can obtain such credentials and who is afforded the luxury of offering them. As hooks (1990) notes, “education for critical consciousness is the most important task before us” (p. 5). In essence, the global community has advanced toward a more progressive understanding of who and how individuals can access higher education under the guise of liberty, justice, and fairness for all. Further, Sultana (2021) suggests, “a focus on the importance of relationally bringing the margins to the center and prioritizing different ways of knowing demonstrates how and why representation matters if we are to pursue decolonial futures” (p. 157). The result is a growing awareness toward actively and consistently engaging minoritized individuals who have existed in the margins of canons of thought and scholarship for centuries.

In the United States of America, this awareness has transcended the boundary between student affairs and academic affairs in an effort to normalize a new academy that is reflective of contemporary American society (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Kezar, 2001). It considers students, faculty, staff, and administrators of all races, genders, social classes, nationalities, and other identifying characteristics as well as their social, emotional, and academic well-being as central to everyone's success in navigating their chosen path in higher education. hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), named this act a “Revolution of Values”. This revolution is not without cost

as many individuals in positions of power promote a vision of freedom and liberation that is synonymous with materialism while those who want to make long-lasting structural change are seen as threats to the social order. In thinking of academia as a place and space designed to foster thoughts and ideas for the betterment of society, we can also see many endless possibilities for a better future.

### **The Margin as a Place of Possibility**

Realigning values allows more individuals to access the benefits of education and either create or maintain pipelines of success typically reserved for the dominant culture. As the classroom is seen as a radical space of possibility in the academy, the entire institution and its place within society is seen as a radical site of progress and upward mobility for all. As such, this special issue aims to further contribute to the idea of structural change in American higher education by bringing scholars from diverse backgrounds together to investigate the relationships of power, equity, and equality, through an analysis of lived experiences in higher education throughout the United States of America.

Through embracing the idea of counter-narrative qualitative research, articles in this special collection are geared toward addressing issues of institutional (i.e., students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders) concern from varying angles. In her work, hooks was known for speaking out against marginalization and the fact that Black people and specifically Black women have to work the hardest to gain respect and succeed in all areas of society and especially in academic spaces. To that end, we put forth a call to embrace hook's (1990) declaration that "marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation. In fact I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (p. 149). This special issue thus brings together scholars to muse on the idea of the margin within academia. What it is, and what it could be.

### **Reflecting, Thinking, and Doing from the Margin for Radical Change**

As a longstanding white male-dominated part of society, the trenches of the margins within American colleges and universities run deep with the blood, sweat, and tears of many minoritized individuals who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, first-generation, non-native English speaking, secular, non-heteronormative conforming, and many other aspects of non-traditional western identity. By bringing their voices to the center of study, we seek to advance

the growing movement to reform academia to be a catalyst for positive change for all individuals, not just those who have historically benefited.

We begin with a formative article from Matias, Luney, and Thompson that provides a referent for the rest of the collection. Matias et. al's work is both theoretical and reflective and elucidates hook's premise of the margins being a location of reflection and thought. Drawing on key tenets of Critical Race Theory the article gives voice to three women of color in academia to define both margins and centers.

Gadsden advances the conversation to a discussion on the need for culturally responsive pedagogy at Historically Black Colleges and Universities along with providing examples of its implementation and success. Such approaches to teaching champion the academic achievement of marginalized students and focus their cultural attributes at the center of the classroom as sources of support and tools for all students' success.

Beckers and Calderon next explore how Historically Black Colleges and Universities can offer opportunities for inclusion to those who are situated on the margins of race and disAbility. They argue the need for cultural competency and social advocacy as colleges and universities advance the postsecondary opportunities for their community. By fulfilling this need, Black students with intellectual disAbilities can have access to a quality experience at post-secondary institutions.

Thompson extends the conversation on students through using a narrative approach to tell her lived experience with academic hazing as a Black woman doctoral student. Through focusing on the intersection of race and place she details the lived experience of many others who look like her living on the margins of academia. Particularly, her work is salient to those who identify with the double bind of service, mother-work, and imposter syndrome.

Shelby-Caffey then shifts our focus toward teacher education through sharing the reality of a Black teacher educator during the Trump administration. She guides readers to unlearn socialization taught to them as a member of an oppressive society. Personal narratives allow for the marginalized to tell their story and relate their experience on the fringe of mainstream society. In looking at the connection of politics, privilege, race, and racism, just as does Thompson, Shelby-Caffey gives a voice to BIPOC individuals and women faculty within academia to be seen and heard.

When considering the collegiate encounters of marginalized communities, pedagogical strategies, and content for instruction also hold importance in conversations held by higher education professionals. Queer theory is a common framework often isolated in terms of conversation and educational instruction. In order to provide students with vast opportunities for literary criticism, it is important to encourage students to approach the theory with newer perspectives and lenses for analysis. Cosey shares her views on the importance of deferring resistance among college students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the negative impacts of mislabeling texts on Queer theory-related content.

Broussard and Mallery further present lessons learned as they inspire change in their academic college towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. Their collective effort was built upon the successes of their university which seeks to ensure a more inclusive environment for its faculty, staff, and students. With references to the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd, they offer a glimpse into the planning and development of a strategic framework that can fulfill their institutional mission and goals.

Reed, Figueroa, and Carpenter shift the focus from narrative to theory in providing an analysis of Critical Race Theory (CRT), what it is, and what it is not. Through aiming to respond to conservatives' recent false-awakening toward banning CRT, they trace the history, development, and value of the theory in relation to the current day. Moreover, they argue for the place of CRT in academia and against its recent displacement toward the margins in response to conservative rhetoric.

In keeping with the theme of Critical Race Theory and the Black experience within higher education, Hatcher, Williams, Parker, DeVaney and Gordon discuss the educational experiences of African American male students and how CRT can be utilized to explore and identify the necessary tactics for improving their academic performance and persistence. The authors conclude valuable information for developing a different perspective of CRT that aids in our understanding of not only the African American male community but many of the marginalized communities discussed throughout this edition.

Closing out this special issue, Johnson and Culverson provide an analysis of the value and place of libraries in ensuring the democratic values of American society and the ways in which they can grow and adapt to our ever-evolving world. In thinking of the library as a Black Public Sphere, they argue, among many things, that the key to advancement is access. In the

broader context of this edition, access is a central piece of understanding how to navigate and to advance beyond the margin. It is through having access to knowledge, people, and resources that equity can be fulfilled and equality can be gained.

### Conclusion

The margin “is a starting point, an intervention, but not the end result” (Fitts, 2011, p. 120). Although the articles included in this special edition may be finite, the idea of centering the margin as a place to make a positive societal change will never cease. As we muse the life and scholarly contributions of bell hooks through this edition, each scholar's work advances our understanding of marginalization in academia and the ways in which we can challenge it. Through challenge comes struggle, but through struggle comes sustainable, long-lasting change. The academy has forever been the central hub of change within society, and it is now time for those on the margins to re-establish it as a space of belonging and ideation.

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