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**A Way Forward:
Nurturing the Imagination at the Intersection of Race, Class, Gender, and Age**

Abstract

Those who are oppressed often find themselves internalizing voices that limit their ability. This paper focuses on a population that falls on the non-hegemonic side of intersectional of race, class, gender, and age: Black girls from poor and working class backgrounds. From my work with youth, I have noticed that internalizing these limiting voices will lead to a sense of personal hopelessness. I suggest that Christian educators combat personal hopelessness by nurturing the theological imagination of their youth.

Introduction

The opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, lays out an understanding of gender differences in how one lives out one's dreams. As Hurston writes about Southern Black American life, she contends that some Black men receive their dreams while some are mocked by dreams that will forever be out of reach. Black women, however, see their dreams differently. The more common reading of this passage is to view it within a feminist lens and conclude that while men yearn, women chase their dreams until they become the reality. I read this a little differently and present a second interpretation. While I believe that the first interpretation is where the text ends, it is not where it begins. This quotation can also be interpreted to say that Black women—who are later referred to as “the mules of the earth”—deal with their reality and make their dreams what they already have. They settle. This is a limitation that prevents growth. For if you only remember what you want to remember, you can't grow. You *have to* be satisfied with what you have. While the men look at the ship and yearn, they at least know what they want. The women convince themselves that what they want is what they have. In this second interpretation, neither gender swims out to the ocean and grabs their dreams from the ship, but women don't even see theirs. Those dreams are too painful for Black women to see, for they know that they can only deal with their own reality. In my interpretation, the text does not view this as a welcomed reality; in fact it goes on to speak of Janie, the protagonist, who sheds the limitations placed on her by the world. But this opening does represent a reality for many of the people Hurston lived around and for many of the youth with whom I have worked. At a younger age, the gender lines may not be so divided. I have seen girls who can still see their hopes and dreams on that ship – they have not been taught how to swim, so their dreams remain within sight even if out of reach. What is it that keeps these dreams at a distance or, worse, too painful to even see? And how can we get girls from interpretation number two to interpretation number one so they make their dreams a reality?

Some would argue that the answer lies in one's nature. They argue that some people will get those dreams and some will not, and the only reason they will not get their wish is because they are too lazy to swim. I do not discount that certain people are born with certain dispositions that help them overcome odds, but I do note that there are odds to overcome that are often placed by a society that benefits from keeping certain people out of the water. Historically, the poor, cultural minorities, women, and the young have all been kept on the shore. But those that

embody all of these identities at once live in a society that constantly sends the message that they shouldn't even be near the ocean.

As a Religious educator, I seek to develop a paradigm for a particular group that have often found themselves blocked from the ocean—Black teen girls from working class backgrounds. I begin by identifying some of the ways society sends a confining message. When the girls believe these messages, they internalize personal hopelessness and a grim sense of their future. I will then introduce a foundational framework based in theological imagination aimed to combat the problem of personal hopelessness. Before that can be achieved, addressing the concerns of Black girls from poor and working class backgrounds must be done with the knowledge of *intersectionality*.

Keeping Girls on the Shore: The Miseducation of Poor Black Girls

Children are naturally inquisitive and full of wonder. They constantly question how things work and why they work the way they do. Yet, as bell hooks contends, “Sadly, children’s passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only.”¹ Passion for thinking opens up a world of possibilities for a child; educating solely for obedience and conformity closes that world and forces youth to believe that the world only holds a small place for them. One’s place in US culture is influenced by one’s race, class, and gender; and youth learn “their place” from a variety of sources, not least from their local neighborhood schools. While in school, children learn many things beyond academic subjects—they learn how to construct their reality. They not only learn what they ought to know, but who they ought to be. Yet many Black girls from poor and working class communities learn that what they are is limited.

In her text, *How Black Disadvantaged Adolescents Socially Construct Reality: Listen, Do You Hear What I Hear?* Loretta Brunious presents an ethnographic study with twenty African-American youth living in poverty in Chicago. First, Brunious notes that while one’s reality is subjectively created and personally meaningful, it is not completely internal. One’s own reality is affected by the perception of those around her. For Black children in a lower socio-economic class, this is a particularly critical factor in how they see themselves, the world around them, and how they see themselves fitting into that world.

When interviewing the students about the importance of school, Brunious notes that many of the youth perceive schooling as a means to social and economic advancement in a very vague sense. In addition, they do not connect schooling with social empowerment, civic responsibilities, or as a means to a brighter future. Students were able to express the cultural understanding as to what school is “supposed” to be for (as in a passageway to college and future employment), but did not necessarily believe it to be true for them. “While the students can articulate the ‘correct’ cultural ideology about the value of education, they appear to be oblivious to their oppressed state.”² Brunious refers to the education received as “the pedagogical machinery.” The use of the term “machinery” connotes her feelings that education, as it stands, reproduces the social order of things and continues the dominant ideology.

Julie Bettie further adds to this conversation with her discoveries as expressed in *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. Bettie presents an ethnographic study she conducted in

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8.

² Loretta Brunious, *How Black Disadvantaged Adolescents Socially Construct Reality: Listen, Do You Hear What I Hear?* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996), 105–106.

California's Central Valley with working class girls in their senior year of high school. Like Brunious, her work examines how youth construct their social reality and, like Brunious, Bettie speaks about the role of the school system to shape these girls' realities. She notes that many of these girls had been tracked into a vocational curriculum. She travelled with the seniors on a field trip to a nearby vocational business school. She noted how the representative explained to the students that instead of attending college, a more realistic goal for them was to get more vocational training. In her critique, Bettie notes, "I never heard students at Waretown High [the school where she did her study] informed of or protected from the questionable recruitment practices of such schools that disseminate misleading information."³ Both the vocational track at the high school and these vocational schools play on the strained economics of these girls. They claim to offer them a cheaper alternative to college and instead offer them a certificate that will land them jobs that may not pay enough to support themselves. These youth are directed towards jobs that perpetuate the class status quo.

These girls have been placed in a precarious situation because of the decisions of others. Yet, instead of having adults walk alongside them and aid them in imagining a variety of options for their lives, they are steered further on to a path that will keep them within the poor working class. At no point do I intend to suggest that there is something wrong with being working class; I, do however, believe that there is something wrong with girls being taught that working class is their only option. I object to *any* kind of teaching that closes doors instead of opens them. The more students hear that there are only certain things they can achieve, the more they believe and internalize it, the more they get a sense of personal hopelessness, and the more their perception of the future is crippled.

Some students in the Brunious study expressed their desire to attend a different school, but among other things, gangs and gang affiliation limit where they can travel safely. This limits school choice. Nearly 80 percent of public school students attend the school closest to their home. Therefore the problems that plague their schools often speak to problems within their neighborhoods. Another aspect of poor Black youth's construction of social reality is the fact that they often come of age in such violence plagued communities. Being nurtured in a violent world creates a distinctive sense of self, sense of reality, and sense of what is possible. Imagining a different future for themselves is far removed from learning how to survive enough to get through the next day.

These factors, among many others, lead to youth feeling very isolated. Gang violence physically limits where youth feel safe enough to travel and serves as a method of isolation. "Isolation has a resounding effect on the social construction of reality for black disadvantaged adolescents."⁴ Brunious asked the students about known landmarks in Chicago. Many of them had not been to nor heard of several of the historical landmarks in the city where they live. Economics combined with violence cripple youth from exploring the world around them.

Brunious contends that overall, "this study reveals that the children in these communities are recipients of negative labeling processes, and as such, they have low-self worth and their lives are plagued by negativism and inferiority."⁵ It is from this standpoint that they construct their reality and learn what is possible in their lives. However, in order for people to enact their own agency, they need to see themselves worthy of that power. bell hooks argues that a low self

³ Julie Bettie, *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

esteem is one of the major factors that still stop African Americans from fulfilling their true potential. “Without a core foundation of healthy self-esteem we cannot practice self-love.”⁶ And without self-love we do not know what we are capable of; we can be convinced to remain small. “Among poor children in our nation, especially the black poor, the message is taught early, ‘Your life has no value—you are doomed.’”⁷ When internalized, these thoughts become the basis of a personal hopelessness and limited view of their future.

Teaching Girls How to Swim by Nurturing their Theological Imagination

To combat the problem of personal hopelessness partially caused by a limiting education, isolation, and poor self worth, the response must be an emancipatory education, community, and a strong sense of self. But to bring all of these things together, I suggest grounding it in the notion of nurturing a liberative theological imagination in girls. In its most simplistic form, theological imagination is a journey one goes through with God with the belief that things can be different and limitless for one personally. This theological imagination not only recognizes that God can fix *the* world, but God can also fix *my* world and *my* community and work with me as an agent of that change. I use the term nurturing, because the girls I worked with already possessed imagination. They did not need anyone to give it to them. However, without nurturing, ideas for the future become wishes on a ship at a distance. Nurturing includes giving girls the tools needed to make their future wishes a reality. By nurturing their theological imagination, girls are not asked to wait until their ships come in or simply to adjust to reality. Instead, they are taught the skills they need to swim out to their dreams.

To further define theological imagination, I build on the work of Delores Williams and her use of the biblical story of Hagar. Through the retelling and analysis of the story Williams explores various notions of the wilderness experience and argues for naming the experience of Africans in America as the Survival/Quality-of-Life Tradition. When discussing the wilderness experience, Williams notes that there are two historical understandings within different historical periods in African-American culture: the wilderness as sacred space and the wilderness as hostile, unfriendly, and threatening. Both expressions of wilderness came together in the story of Hagar. The retelling of the Hagar story is helpful to my work with girls. The social reality they are forced to construct is a wilderness experience. These youth exist in a place of physical isolation where they live in fear because certain parts of their environments are often hostile, unfriendly, and threatening. Gangs manifest as a way of seeking to conquer this wilderness and obtain some sense of control. As the pioneers did, in an attempt to conquer and control the wilderness, they destroy others in their wake. Youth are then forced to suffer the circumstances in this wilderness. Williams’ analysis of the Hagar story gives hope and aids in understanding how one survives this wilderness experience, because in the end Hagar finds her means of survival in the wilderness. Williams credits Hagar’s survival to a “new vision” that she receives from God. After her experience with God, she sees a well she had not seen before. This well is the God-given source of her survival. I argue that for girls living in the wilderness today, theological imagination can serve as their new vision—an additional source of survival.

As poor and working class Black girls continue to find their way in the wilderness, it is within the responsibility of the body of Christ to help these girls to collectively see their new

⁶ bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

vision. I view this task of the Church as nurturing a theological imagination that is liberating and transformative. In being conditioned to construct a problematic reality, these youth have been stripped of the power of their imagination. bell hooks notes, “in dominator culture the killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo.”⁸ Having suffered the killing of one’s ability to imagine a different life, one is left with the belief that one’s perceived reality is not only an acceptable option, but the only true option. Therefore, to see a new vision, this imagination needs to be rekindled. “Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folk can and do use.”⁹ Imagination gives agency. Imagination gives hope. Imagination allows people to see their faith in new ways. Imagination decolonizes the mind, replaces what has been stripped, and rekindles a natural inquisitive exploring tendency found in children but removed as children get older. bell hooks argues that we live in a world where children are asked to imagine, draw, create games, have imaginary friends, but when they get older, “imagination is seen as dangerous, a force that could possibly impede knowledge acquisition.”¹⁰ Indeed imagination *does* impede the acquisition of passive receiving of knowledge. Imagination encourages students to challenge, question, and ask how things can be different. Engaged with critical thinking, this imagination can lead one to then enact this differently imagined world.

⁸ hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

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