ABSTRACT

POLITICAL SCIENCE

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BLACK QUEER FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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This dissertation explores Black queer feminism as a frame of reference relevant to the study of Black political science and the practice of Black politics in the United States. While Black feminist political scientists have moved Black politics scholarship forward, beyond its masculinist focus, much less analysis of the ways in which cis-heteronormativity and binary conceptions of gender have informed this scholarship has occurred. This fact renders scholars unprepared to explain critical aspects vis-à-vis Black communities and may explain why few frames of reference illuminate Black queer and trans womxn’s political experiences. Furthermore, because more mainstream subfields such as women and politics, and LGBTQ politics do not consistently embrace racial analyses they cannot generate rigorous insight concerning the lives of Black LGBTQ individuals and groups. The primary research question that guides this dissertation asks,
how might a Black queer feminist frame of reference explain the nature of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience? I employ exploratory case studies to build upon the work of Black political scientists by investigating the potential of an alternative lens that is inclusive of Black persons and groups marginalized because of their gender identity and sexuality. A qualitative content analysis is relied upon to examine the activist scholarship of two Black queer womxn, Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen, with the objective of synthesizing a Black queer feminist frame of reference from their political thought. I argue that Black queer feminism is well suited to advance the radical imperative of Black political science. This dissertation produces new knowledge about the scope, possibility, and relevance of political science in two fundamental ways: by exploring an alternative frame to analyze Black womxn and LGBTQ politics I offer a different approach to studying Black politics, women and politics, and LGBTQ politics; therefore, a further contribution is the integration of literatures that are currently understood as discursively distinct. These sub-disciplinary disjunctions render invisible Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans people more generally. Ultimately, this dissertation inspires counter-hegemonic knowledge, expanding the scope, possibility, and relevance of the discipline while challenging the rigidity of what and who counts as “legitimate” subjects for political science inquiries.
BLACK QUEER FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Cis/Cisgender:** “Identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth. A gender identity that society considers to match the…sex assigned at birth. The prefix cis-means ‘on this side of’ or ‘not across from.’ A term used to call attention to the privilege of people who are not trans.”¹

**Gender Binary:** “The view of patriarchy that there are only two genders, ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ with gender stereotypes seen as inherent or ‘natural.’ People who identify as some other or nonbinary gender category, or who are gender nonconformist or gender variant by defying the stereotypes, are said to ‘break the binary’.”²

**Heteronormative:** “localized practices and those centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society.”³


LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

**Queer**: 1) “can be used to refer to the range of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people and provides a convenient shorthand for ‘LGBT’.”4 2) “a political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle-and upper-class heterosexuality.”5

**Sexuality**: 1) “articulates the connectedness between sexed bodies, gender normativity, sexual morality, sexualization of racism, and sexualized institutions such as the family, schools, and the state.”6 2) A person’s sexual orientation, sexual desire, and/or sexual practice.

**Sex Binary**: “The view of patriarchy that there are only two types of sexed bodies, male and female, and that these genotypic and phenotypic body attributes are an immutable natural reality. The sex binary erases or marginalizes both intersex people (whose physical sex at birth is not seen as fitting into either binary category) and transsexual or

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4 Omunity, *Queer Terminology from A to Q*, 12.

5 Cohen, 441.

transgender people who transition to a different sexed phenotype (binary or nonbinary) than that associated with their assigned sex at birth.”

Trans/Transgender: “an umbrella term that describes a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or expression differs from conventional expectations based on their assigned [sex at birth].”

Womxn: Paralleling Matandel, I use womxn as a radically inclusive political identity and gender category that transgresses the white supremacist cisheteronormative assumptions of colonial womanhood. Womxn are trans, cis, gender nonconforming, queer, heterosexual, and exist beyond these adjectives.

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7 The Trans Advocate, “Glossary.”

8 Qmunity, Queer Terminology from A to Q, 14.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender liberation still belong on any Black feminist agenda.

—Barbara Smith

Through a Black queer feminist approach, I think we’re compelled to create spaces where we can have hard and liberatory discussions based on love and respect.

—Cathy J. Cohen

Statement of the Problem

Where are Black queer and trans people in U.S. political science scholarship? More specifically, where are Black queer and trans womxn in U.S. political science scholarship? Might it be that this lacuna exists and persists due to the lack of critical frames of reference that center non-hetero-and-cis-normative persons and phenomena vis-à-vis racial, gender, sexual, and economic oppressions? Moreover, is political science even a discipline that is prepared and equipped to undertake such subversive theoretical and empirical research, research that is ultimately deployed in an effort to bring about transformation and liberatory ends? After all, U.S. political science has historically been resistant to subjects, epistemologies, and methods that challenge conservative
disciplinary orthodoxy.¹

Notably, Black political scientists, as activist-scholars, have endeavored to push the discipline beyond its rigidity, along with women and politics, and LGBTQ politics scholars. Despite efforts made by Black feminist political scientists to integrate more substantive analyses that center Black womxn and incorporate gender as an analytical category within the masculinist Black politics subfield, there remains a dearth of feminist scholarship that foregrounds Black queer and trans political realities. This fact renders scholars unprepared to explain critical aspects of contemporary society and thus may explain why few frames of reference illuminate Black queer and trans womxn’s political experiences and behavior. There is limited research that transcends the cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions that reinforce binary gender categories and identities as normal and natural. Indeed, the study of Black gender politics has at times been reduced to differences between cisgendered “women” and “men.” This pattern of scholarship holds assumptions that further marginalize Black community members whose political experiences are informed by non-normative gender identities and sexualities. Furthermore, because the women and politics, and LGBTQ politics subfields do not

consistently embrace racial analyses these subfields fail to generate insight concerning Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics.²

The “intersectional invisibility”³ of Black queer and trans people necessitates more than an add and stir approach. As a corrective, I argue that an alternative frame of reference is required to place these marginalized political realities into context. In this dissertation, I explore a Black queer feminist frame of reference, deriving the contours and potential of this frame from the political thought of Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen. Smith’s and Cohen’s work contests the scope of what we consider “political,” broadens where we locate power dynamics and struggles, and uncovers further nuances vis-à-vis Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics that continues the tradition of activist-oriented Black politics knowledge production. I argue that a Black queer feminist frame of reference can further radicalize, democratize, and modernize knowledge production within the discipline, continuing the path cultivated by Black feminist political scientists.

Throughout this dissertation I call attention to Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics as a subfield of study in U.S. political science. The addition of sexuality to the Black women and gender politics subfield seems appropriate considering that

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gender and sexuality are often mutually constitutive concepts, ideologies, and practices.\textsuperscript{4}

Thus, the gap in the published literature in which normative and nonnormative sexuality are explicitly identified as politically significant leaves our understanding of gender politics incomplete. To be sure, this is not a novel area of study,\textsuperscript{5} yet it is underdeveloped and often unnamed within the discipline. I conceive of this subfield as grounded in the ideas of Black queer feminism, a political theory and praxis that merits further development within political science. In 1999, Cohen critiqued Black academics for the “absence of any sustained writing on black lesbians and gay men.”\textsuperscript{6} This remains true for the discipline as there is a lack of research and theorizing on Black trans and queer politics in general. While frames of reference that center the power struggle between Black and white Americans have helped to guide inquiries into particular Black political phenomena,\textsuperscript{7} these frames present limitations for scholars seeking to study the complexity and political implications of gender and sexuality within Black communities. Further, Black feminist scholarship that remains wedded to a cis-heteronormative binary also presents challenges, thus urging scholars to seek out alternative theoretical and analytical frameworks.


\textsuperscript{6} Cohen, \textit{The Boundaries of Blackness},” 73.

While in this dissertation I begin from the political thought of Smith and Cohen, Black lesbian feminists, there are far more examples of Black queer feminist theorizing that merit serious scholarly attention. Certainly, what is today named as Black queer feminism is not new. Its theoretical and activist lineage can be traced to Black lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Pat Parker, among others; and Black trans womxn such as Marsha P. Johnson. Therefore, I must mention here that there is not simply a single definitive conceptualization of Black queer feminism. Cohen has remarked that the definition of what is today named as Black queer feminism is “in flux,” such that “there’s a struggle about what we mean by a ‘Black queer feminist’ politics.” This dissertation enters this struggle over meaning, thereby contributing to the debate concerning the conceptualization of Black queer feminism, by looking to the political thought of Smith and Cohen for guidance. Moreover, this dissertation continues and contributes to a particular disciplinary debate as well as a


larger discourse about the nature of Black feminisms and Black feminist politics, notably by problematizing the absence of Black *queer* feminism in political science.

**Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore and critically examine Black queer feminist activist scholarship, relevant to the study and practice of Black politics in the United States, in order to develop a more expansive frame of reference to ground and direct future political science inquiries, especially those concerning Black queer and trans political experience. I employ exploratory case studies to build upon the work of Black feminist political scientists by investigating the potential of an alternative paradigm that is inclusive of Black persons and groups marginalized because of their gender and sexual identities. A qualitative content analysis is relied upon to examine the activist scholarship of two Black queer womxn, Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen, with the objective of ascertaining and synthesizing the constituent elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference from their political thought. It is the intent of this study to investigate how their ideas inform the constituent elements that underpin a Black queer feminist frame of reference, thereby expanding the study of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality in political science. The primary research question that guides this dissertation asks, *how might a Black queer feminist frame of reference explain the nature of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience?*

Critically engaging with Black womxn’s intellectual production and activism is fundamental to this dissertation. Critically engaging with Black womxn’s work means
taking Black womxn’s work and ideas seriously; it means centering Black womxn’s work—work that manifest across a variety of mediums both inside and beyond academe—in scholarly projects; it means (re)reading Black womxn’s writing and struggling with their theories; and it means analyzing Black womxn’s social and political thought, illuminating their intellectual contributions. Reading, citing, and engaging thoughtfully and meaningfully with all Black womxn’s work remains a political and counter-hegemonic act. In this dissertation, I am working with the works of Black queer womxn with the hope of conveying the basic assumption that Black queer womxn matter, and that their work deserves to be centered for its contribution to dissident knowledges, as well as for the political possibilities it has created. This dissertation intentionally presents the complementary work of a Black queer feminist elder (Smith) and a Black queer feminist following nearly a generation behind in her footsteps (Cohen). In this way, this study highlights both the genealogical roots of Black queer feminist politics and analysis, while also illuminating the present and future possibilities of Black queer feminism as a critical frame for knowledge generation in the service of liberation.

Study Rationale

This dissertation contributes necessary research for the study of Black politics, specifically Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics, in the United States. Because

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political science continues to operate as a conservative discipline\textsuperscript{13} it continues to trail behind other fields that are more open to research and theory devoted to queer, trans, and Black feminist politics. The inattention to queer and trans politics by Black political scientists suggests that the Black politics subfield may be unprepared to explain critical aspects of Black political experience. Addressing this epistemic gap requires innovative scholarship that transcends the boundaries of “traditional” political science, making use of all relevant knowledges to illuminate currently overlooked individuals, groups, and phenomena. Paralleling Black feminist political scientist Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd,\textsuperscript{14} I argue that the discipline of political science must make full use of interdisciplinary knowledges that broaden our epistemological and methodological toolkits. By doing so the discipline can generate scholarship that both explains sociopolitical phenomena and generates ideas that are applicable to liberatory objectives. Just as Black people are diverse (i.e. there is no one way to be Black or experience Blackness), scholars need a diversity of analytical strategies in order to interpret and elucidate Black life. While Black feminist political scientists have been successful in bringing some aspects of Black Women’s Studies into the discipline,\textsuperscript{15} we have yet to queer Black studies and Black

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gender studies in political science. Black feminist frameworks must be problematized and elaborated in order to broaden the study of Black politics.

Accordingly, this dissertation builds upon the extant frames generated by other Black political scientists, such as Alexander-Floyd, Evelyn M. Simien, and Mack H. Jones.\textsuperscript{16} By highlighting the importance of frames of reference for epistemic and liberatory objectives, this dissertation contributes to a discourse on the politics of knowledge (production): frames of reference contain assumptions about social and political reality that can constric and/or expand what the discipline values as “legitimate” areas and topics of study, whose political thought is taken seriously for its explanatory and prescriptive utility, and whose agency—if not humanity—is recognized. Assuredly, this study is indebted to the research and theorizing of Black womxn and Black feminist political scientists. The path laid by these scholars makes the subject of this dissertation possible. In particular, Alexander-Floyd’s scholarship has been immensely informative and affirming for one’s own intellectual development and curiosities. Alexander-Floyd’s conception of a radical Black feminist frame of reference lays the groundwork for what I can now explore and specify as a Black queer feminist frame of reference for the study of Black politics.

The current study, while recognizing the groundwork laid by Alexander-Floyd and other Black political scientists, attempts to build upon and expand frames that, in one

way or another, limit the possibility and visibility of Black political phenomena. These frames do not fully explain, center, nor underline the significance of sexuality and non-normative gender identities. Furthermore, these frames are limited by their inability to disrupt the rigid and cisgendered gender binary that reinforces heteropatriarchy and notions of family that support hegemonic state formation, and thus imperialism and capitalism. The political experiences of, for instance, Black gender nonconforming lesbian womxn or Black bisexual trans individuals remains outside of the reach of the established frameworks. As feminist political philosopher Martha Ackelsberg writes, “[L]esbian, gay, bisexual and trans[gender] individuals— and groups— engage in activities designed to influence power and policy, as do the members of other interest groups. Therefore, political science ought to be studying lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans[gender] groups in order to get a fuller picture of the U.S. political arena.”

This dissertation additionally makes a specific knowledge contribution to the development of the study of marginalized groups within political science. I am equally concerned with the study of politics by the discipline as I am with the racial, gender, and sexuality politics of the discipline. Groups marginalized within U.S. society have also been marginalized within political science. Thus, this study produces new knowledge about the scope, possibility, and relevance of political science in two additional ways: 1) by exploring an alternative frame to analyze Black womxn and LGBTQ politics I offer a different approach to studying Black politics, women and politics, and LGBTQ politics;

2) hence, a further contribution is the integration of literatures that are currently understood as discursively distinct. These sub-disciplinary disjunctions render invisible Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans people at large. Research that amplifies marginalized populations can potentially create innovative policy solutions to address the needs of those who are most vulnerable. Ultimately, this dissertation inspires counter-hegemonic knowledge, expanding the scope, possibility, and relevance of the discipline while challenging the rigidity of what and who counts as “legitimate” subjects for political science inquiries.

**Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation will first provide a review of literature addressing Black politics, Black feminist politics, and LGBTQ politics within the discipline. The development of the study of marginalized groups in political science is described within an activist-scholar context. Limitations and gaps are noted to provide further reasoning as to why the current study is significant. In Chapter III, the frames of reference that served as points of departure for this dissertation are detailed. This chapter proves an explanation for why the established frames of reference within the Black politics (including Black women and politics, and Black gender politics) subfields do not thoroughly illuminate gender and sexuality politics. While Black feminist epistemologies and methodologies have been applied to the study of Black politics in an effort to foreground Black womxn as political actors, most research has not moved beyond binary gender analyses and cisgender normative assumptions. Thus, it has become necessary to broaden and
intentionally queer the Black feminist lens in political science so that the paradigm can be used in accordance with its full explanatory and visionary power.

In Chapter IV, methodologies grounded in feminist principles are presented alongside an explanation of the research methods and processes relied upon. This dissertation’s findings are then reported in Chapter V. A critical discussion is developed in Chapter VI that expounds the contributions of this study by offering the implications of Black queer feminism as a frame of reference in political science, particularly how this frame of reference can inform the study of Black politics (Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics specifically). This chapter continues the observations put forward in the literature review by placing Black queer feminism in conversation with political science, with an explicit focus on the politics of knowledge (production) within the discipline and academia more broadly. This dissertation concludes with a summary of its foregoing contents and generates recommendations for future political science research employing a Black queer feminist frame of reference.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current study is informed by previous scholarship on Black politics, Black feminist politics, and LGBTQ politics within political science. This literature review not only details the development of knowledge production vis-à-vis marginalized groups within the discipline, but also places the struggles and still evolving research areas in their activist-scholar context. Accordingly, this chapter reviews both the study of politics within the discipline, as well as the racial, gender, and sexuality politics of the discipline, including how identity categories influence knowledge production. Groups marginalized within the larger U.S. society have been equally marginalized within political science. Marginalized scholars have struggled on their own behalf in order to develop both scholarship and areas of study that reflect their identities and the oppressions they face.

Before moving forward, a preliminary comment must be made concerning the final section of this literature review, which surveys research on LGBTQ politics. Though much of the available research is not specific to the study of Black politics—that is, there remains a dearth of research that investigates and theorizes the politics of non-normative gender identity and sexuality in relation to Black individuals—it is necessary to examine what has been studied and produced in order to determine how a Black queer feminist frame of reference can expand how political scientists come to know and study queer and trans politics. Although the focus of this dissertation is specific to the study of Black
politics, it must be noted that a Black queer feminist frame of reference will necessarily broaden and interact with other subfields (notably women and politics, and LGBT/Queer politics) as these subfields share similar concerns, theories, epistemologies, and methods.

The Struggle for a Black Political Science

The study of Black politics within U.S. political science has been contentious since the founding of the discipline. Black political scientists, as activist-scholars, have sought not only to unmask and overcome the racist foundations of the discipline, but to equally produce necessary and innovative research and theory in relation to Black political thought and behavior. This has been no easy endeavor as political science has historically been hostile to the study of race and ethnicity. In fact, racist ideologies have shaped the epistemic frameworks and development of the field. A genealogical analysis conducted by McClain et al., traces the racist origins of the discipline to John W. Burgess, “one of the founders of American political science.”1 Burgess espoused the “scientific” paradigms concerning race that were prominent during the 19th century. These ideas ultimately facilitated “anti-black sentiment and white supremacy masquerading as dispassionate scholarship.”2 These racist beliefs would become

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2 McClain et al., 10.
entrenched within the discipline making it more difficult for Black politics to be considered as a “legitimate area of study.”

The thread of racism within the discipline proved difficult for scholars seeking to study political science from a Black perspective. According to Ernest Wilson, “[p]rior to the mid-1960s, putting together a reading list on ‘Black Politics’ was not easy and much of the material would not have been written by political sciences, but by sociologists, historians and others, many of them black.” This fact underscores the interdisciplinary roots of Black political science. Of the few early studies that were written in political science with attention to Black politics, most were authored by white researchers, whom, notably, lacked any Black experience and Black perspective. Wilson further states that even by 1985, political scientists had produced little theoretical and empirical work in the area of Black politics that had greatly influenced the discipline.

As explained by Dorian Warren, “for most of the hundred-year history of American political science, work on race and politics was neither accepted in nor accessible to the field.” Though the study of race and ethnic politics eventually made its

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3 McClain et al., 2.

4 Ernest J. Wilson, “Why Political Scientists Don't Study Black Politics, but Historians and Sociologists Do,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 601.


6 Wilson, 602.

way into the discipline, there were few frames of reference and methodological
approaches conducive for generating knowledge about Black politics. Michael Dawson
and Cathy J. Cohen assert that early studies in political science lacked theoretical
frameworks that accounted for the social, political, and economic processes that create
racial categorizations and produce discrimination.\(^8\) Without attention to race and racism
the discipline was less equipped to produce knowledge that explained, for instance, how
race “structures policy preferences, candidate positions, the character of American social
movements, domestic political alliances, and electoral choice.”\(^9\)

Methodological Issues

According to Dawson and Cohen, the study of race in political science has
occurred along three major trajectories: 1) examinations of racial politics foregrounding
white racial attitudes and the attitudes and behaviors of racially marginalized groups, 2)
the impact of race on public policy, and 3) the impact of race on nation-state
development.\(^10\) The hinderance to greater diversity in the analyses and subjects of race
and politics has been attributed to the restrictive methodological approaches of the
discipline. Indeed, Black political scientists have repeatedly pointed to the limitations and

\(^8\) Michael Dawson and Cathy J. Cohen, “Problems in the Study of the Politics of Race,” in
Political Science: The State of the Discipline, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, (Washington, DC: W.
W. Norton, 2002), 490-1.

\(^9\) Dawson and Cohen, 496.

\(^10\) Dawson and Cohen, 496.
hurdles caused by mainstream methodologies.\textsuperscript{11} Methodologies in political science have been historically geared toward the study of elites and those in top leadership roles in American institutions. These methodologies are not always advantageous for the study of Black politics, which necessarily studies “the poor and powerless” as systemic disadvantage and racial oppression have kept Black Americans in lower positions in society.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, Black political scientists have maintained that behavioralism is far too narrow for the study of race politics. Methodologies modeled after the natural sciences unduly rely on quantitative methods\textsuperscript{13} that fail to capture the complexity of race and structural inequities. Indeed, Hanes Walton, Jr.’s \textit{Invisible Politics: Black Political Behavior} provides a book length critique of the role of the behavioralist approach in obscuring the facts of Black political experience.\textsuperscript{14} According to Walton, the behavioralism deployed by early white scholars provided suspect empirical data about Black Americans based on small sample sizes and an over reliance on survey research; not to mention the disproportionate attention placed on the individual as the unit of analysis which concealed the role of systemic racism.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{13} Warren, 219.
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Methodological issues impacting research on Black politics continued into the twenty-first century. As Warren (2005) maintains, the “epistemological and methodological hegemony of positivism, behavioralism, rational choice, game theory, and method-driven and quantitatively focused research” has a “silencing effect” for Black scholars.\footnote{Smith, Hanes Walton, Jr.: Architect of the Black Science of Politics, 220.} This is because alternative approaches to the study of politics are devalued by mainstream political science. Dawson and Cohen further critique mainstream methodological and theoretical paradigms for their “excessive reliance on the discipline of economics” and, mirroring earlier critiques imparted by Walton, the “constant emphasis on individual level of analysis.”\footnote{Dawson and Cohen, 488.} Because mainstream political science has historically championed positivist theories, “rarely [is the discipline] confronted with work on race and politics that engages important normative theories and concepts like justice, equality, or democracy through a lens informed by careful empirical work.”\footnote{Dawson and Cohen, 488.}

The National Conference of Black Political Scientists

Black political scientists have fought vigorously to establish and maintain a Black politics subfield. The initial moves toward the development of a Black political science coincides with the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s.\footnote{Rogers M. Smith, “The Puzzling Place of Race in American Political Science,” \textit{PS: Political Science and Politics} 37, no. 1 (January 2004): 42.}
The National Conference of Black Political Scientists (NCOBPS) was born out of the activism and organizing of Black political scientists at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). While mainstream Eurocentric political science concerned itself with maintaining inequitable distributions of power and privilege, Black political scientists sought to work to end white world domination.20 Black political scientists were motivated by a responsibility to the Black community.21 Their intellectual and professional labor as social scientists was to be used to address systemic racial oppression. According to Mack H. Jones, one of the founding members of the NCOBPS, the NCOBPS was “committed…to developing a new, different political science, a black political science, and we committed ourselves to developing an organization that would be a part of that interrelated network of self-defining and self-directed black organizations involved in the struggle for black liberation.”22

The NCOBPS was directly tied to Black political struggle and social movements. As Alexander-Floyd, D’ Andra Orey, and Brown-Dean explain, Black political scientists, especially those working at HBCUs, were routinely marginalized and isolated from the decisions of the American Political Science Association (APSA).23 In 1969,


22 Jones, Knowledge, Power, and Black Politics, 32.

over 30 Black political scientists assembled with members of the APSA on the HBCU campus of Southern University and A&M College. This convening, designated as “The Conference of Political Science Curriculum at Predominantly Black Institutions” would lead to the founding and initial meeting of the NCOBPS one year later at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University).

The NCOBPS continues to serve as a vital space for Black political scientists to connect with one another. Correspondingly, its accompanying journal, The National Political Science Review (1989-2019), served as an indispensable publication for scholarship on Black politics. Its legacy continues today through the National Review of Black Politics. Jones has argued resolutely that the study of Black politics within the discipline should “subvert the existing order insofar as it reflects the racism which abounds in American society.” Advocating the viewpoint that HBCUs and their respective political science departments should encourage students to question the status quo as opposed to sustaining it, Jones has produced considerable scholarship that reflects the activist-scholar mandate.

24 Alexander-Floyd, D’ Andra Orey, and Brown-Dean, 319.


Frames of Reference and the Marginalization of Black Political Science

The study of Black politics in political science generally proceeds from a “Black science” framework. As Katherine Tate explains, Black science “work is often more critical of American politics, American political institutions, and American society than mainstream work.”27 In a similar vein, Jones championed the notion of a Black science by consistently advocating for the production of subversive scholarship in the area of Black politics. In the essay “A Frame of Reference for Black Politics” (1972), Jones presents a frame of reference to aid explanations of Black political experience. For Jones, the essence of Black politics is the power struggle between Black and white Americans, as well as the struggles between groups inside the Black community who hold diverse positions about the foci of a singular Black policy agenda. Consequently, Jones conceived of the “dominant-submissive-group model” for scholars of Black politics to frame their studies. 28

While these frames of reference have helped to guide inquiries into Black political phenomena, and have notably been built upon by Black feminist political scientists,29 it can still be challenging for Black scholars to find favorable publishing opportunities. The persistent lack of concern for research in Black politics by mainstream political science

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28 Jones, Knowledge, Power, and Black Politics, 9.

journals has served as a prolonged impediment.\textsuperscript{30} While much progress has been made, there are still difficulties for the study of Black politics in the 21st century. Indeed, Tate argues that scholarship on Black American politics remains segregated within the discipline. The ghettoization of this research serves only to perpetuate the biases of mainstream political science due to insufficient critical engagement with knowledge produced within the Black politics subfield.\textsuperscript{31} Insufficient attention to historical and cultural context in research produced by mainstream political science suggests that mainstream political science may be inadequate for the study of Black politics. Scholars seeking to examine group-specific and intersectional politics still must go “underground” in order to research their topics of interest.\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, Black politics remains at the margins in graduate education and is minimally covered in many United States government and politics textbooks.\textsuperscript{33} Dianne Pinderhughes has emphasized why the dissemination of knowledge about race and politics matters:

If we do not transmit these rich memories, interests and understanding of how the discipline has functioned in a highly discriminatory fashion, and how American institutions have organized political life according to the racist preferences of American slave owners and their descendants in the present, the new generations of Black political scientists will enter the field and either be absorbed along in an uncritical manner, or find themselves unwelcome but unable to understand the whys and wherefores. New White political scientists will be unsocialized by our influence. And generations of American students, Black as well as White, will

\textsuperscript{30} Tate, 94.

\textsuperscript{31} Tate, 94.

\textsuperscript{32} Alexander-Floyd, Orey, and Brown-Dean, 319.

have no knowledge or understanding of the politics of race that we have worked so carefully to understand and to publish because it will have gone untransmitted.\(^\text{34}\)

The reality of these adverse circumstances explains why the subordination of Black studies within the discipline continues.

### Limitations of Black Politics

The study of Black politics within political science was born from the commitments of activist-scholars seeking to advance the struggle for Black liberation. Nevertheless, this scholarship is not above respectful critique. Although the study of Black politics within political science was born from scholars devoted to liberatory transformation, some scholars nevertheless overlooked their own masculinist priorities when shaping the subfield, while more recent work has sometimes taken on the uncritical posture of “traditional” political science. Cohen has argued that “studies have at times been so consumed with the actions of leaders, usually male leaders, and well-established political organizations that they have ignored the everyday contests over space, dress, and autonomy that may pervade the lives of average Black people.”\(^\text{35}\) This hierarchy of identity and location omits the interlocking oppressions that impact the lives of Black

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womxn, Black queer and transgender individuals, and obscures non-traditional political activities.

Black feminist political scientist Evelyn M. Simien has highlighted how political science research oftentimes presumes that “all the women are white, and all of the blacks are men,”36 a statement that represents a nod to the foundational Black Women’s Studies text produced by Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith37 (Smith’s activist scholarship being the subject of one of the case studies herein). Scholarship produced within the Black politics subfield has at times demonstrated exclusionary “race first” assumptions. Black politics in particular, notes Simien, has perpetuated the community’s “hierarchy of interests” in which Black womxn are pressured to subordinate their gender specific interests and needs.38 The lack of an intersectional approach within the subfield left early scholarship unable to thoroughly account for intra-group power differences, especially in the areas of gender and sexuality. Further, Wendy Smooth has argued that without new methods to determine what is meaningful to Black community interests, Black womxn will continue to be sidelined in Black policy agendas.39 Additionally, several critiques have materialized that point to the


37 Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).


overemphasis on the Black-white binary,\textsuperscript{40} which has defined some of the frames of reference for the study of Black political phenomena.

Still, the struggle for the study of Black politics within the discipline represents the foundational efforts by Black political scientists to both expose and transcend the narrow, elitist, and conservative boundaries of mainstream political science. It was and remains crucial for Black political scientists to fight for the advancement of the discipline in order to research, theorize, and advance knowledge for a more just world. In the next section, a review of Black womxn and Black feminist political scientists is presented. Early Black womxn political scientists helped to build upon Black studies within the discipline. More recent scholars have assisted in the maintenance and expansion of the Black politics subfield, most notably bringing the study of Black womxn and Black gender politics within the purview of political science.

\textbf{Black Feminism in Political Science}

Much like the study of Black politics in general, Black feminist political science was established from an activist-scholar zeal that has characterized Black studies within the discipline. Black feminists have underlined the masculine bias in studies that foreground Black politics and have prioritized intersectional approaches. Intersectional approaches investigate political phenomena from the perspective that identities and oppressions are mutually constituted (this point will be elaborated further below). This

section provides an overview of scholarship that has contributed to the foundation of Black women and politics, and Black gender politics within political science. In addition to reviewing the works of Black womxn, this section highlights the impact of Black feminist thought while also indicating its shortcomings alluding to the potential of alternative frames of reference.

In the article “Contributions of Black Women in Political Science to a More Just World,” Black feminist political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry provides a valuable overview of “prestigious” Black womxn who have pushed the discipline to transcend its Euro-American and male centrism. Black womxn in political science have developed supplementary areas of study such as Black women and politics, and Black gender politics. These scholars are motivated to produce knowledge that will assist the larger Black community in the ongoing struggles for equity, justice, and liberation.41 Harris-Perry highlights the work of Jewel Prestage who was among the first Black womxn to study political power by utilizing frameworks that centered both race and gender. According to Robert Smith, Jewel Prestage “was a pioneering black feminist scholar and role model for black women political scientists.”42 Within the subfield of urban politics, Dianne Pinderhughes questioned the underlying assumptions of the pluralist paradigm and illuminated how the study of Black politics and community activism destabilizes the

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hegemonic frames that had previously prevailed within the discipline.\textsuperscript{43} Harris-Perry also identifies the work of Ange-Marie Hancock, noting that Hancock has centered research on Black womxn welfare recipients and uncovered the inadequacies of “American’s social welfare state.”\textsuperscript{44} Academic research pioneered by Black womxn political scientists is imperative because “it makes vulnerable communities the object of study and thereby confers academic value and meaning to the experiences of marginalized people.”\textsuperscript{45}

Harris-Perry’s \textit{Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America} did just that by illuminating how society’s negative perceptions of Black womxn has detrimental consequences for psychological, social, and political wellbeing. Stereotypes about Black womxn have material costs that can and do influence public policy.\textsuperscript{46} These stereotypes are perpetuated through ideology, controlling images, and policy. Too often are Black womxn’s experiences of racialized sexism are discounted, says Harris-Perry, as the difficulties Black womxn face have historically been interpreted as a product of Black womxn’s own inherent failure while the social structure is left unquestioned.

Black feminist political scientists frequently center Black womxn and/or political differences attributed to gender, which they have defined as differences between (presumably) cisgender Black womxn and men. Wendy Smooth has called attention to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{43} Harris-Lacewell, 343.
\bibitem{44} Harris-Lacewell, 344.
\bibitem{45} Harris-Lacewell, 344.
\bibitem{46} Melissa V. Harris-Perry, \textit{Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), Kindle.
\end{thebibliography}
the problematic tendency in Black politics studies that fail to incorporate an analysis of gender.\textsuperscript{47} Smooth reports on the gender gap within the Black electorate noting that Black womxn vote at higher rates in presidential elections than Black men, and are more likely to support Democratic candidates.\textsuperscript{48} Nonetheless, Black policy agendas neglect to include considerations for Black womxn’s lived realities as gender differences are frequently neglected.\textsuperscript{49}

In a study investigating attitudes concerning gender equality within the Black community, Black feminist political scientist Evelyn Simien suggests a link between Black feminist consciousness and political behavior. According to Simien, womxn and men holding progressive beliefs about gender may also be more likely to engage in the political process by voting in a presidential election, signing petitions, protesting, or monetarily supporting a campaign (among other political activities).\textsuperscript{50} These research studies demonstrate how Black womxn in political science “have contested the field, challenged the academy, and contributed to the development of more just communities.”\textsuperscript{51} Similar to the general study of Black politics, Black women and politics has been institutionalized by Black political science organizations such as the NCOBPS

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\textsuperscript{47} Smooth, 81.

\textsuperscript{48} Smooth, 80.

\textsuperscript{49} Smooth, 81.


\textsuperscript{51} Harris-Lacewell, “Contributions of Black Women in Political Science to a More Just World,” 342.
and the Association for the Study of Black Women in Politics (ASBWP). Co-founded by Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Rose M. Harris, ASBWP strives to cultivate a network for scholars producing interdisciplinary and intersectional politics scholarship centering Black womxn.

Intersectionality

Simien and Hancock explain intersectionality research as those analyses that center “the simultaneous and interactive effects of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and national origin as categories of difference.” Research that utilizes intersectionality as a analytical framework is noted to move beyond rigid disciplinary boundaries. Although the roots of this specific concept are found within the writings of Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (who originally theorized the concept as an analytic to address power, structural discrimination, and structural identity vis-à-vis Black womxn), the idea that Black womxn encounter multiple overlapping oppressions is consistently elucidated in the works of Black womxn. Kristie Dotson, a professional Black feminist philosopher, explains that the various ideas concerning and describing multiple oppressions are metaphors that attempt to express a distinct experience. The


53 Simien and Hancock, 186.


ideas of Black feminists such as Francis Beale (using the metaphor of “double jeopardy”), Hortense Spillers (using the metaphor of “interstices”), and Pauli Murray (who coined “Jane Crow”) among others, are examples of how Black feminists have come to understand their particular sociopolitical identity, the experiences of Black womxnhood, and structures of oppression.

Not all Black feminist political scientists agree on how intersectionality should be employed in social science research. Alexander-Floyd takes issue with Hancock’s assertion that intersectionality can, or should, transcend its origins from “black female subjectivity and women of color more generally.” Alexander-Floyd argues that attempts to make intersectional analyses broadly applicable in order to account for “any and all forms of difference and identity” erases the intellectual labor and experiences of Black womxn, who developed the framework. Indeed, an intersectional analysis of the discipline of political science reveals that publications drawing on intersectionality elide Black womxn thinkers as the architects of the analytical framework while concurrently overlooking Black womxn as subjects in research. When assessing the state of contemporary political science and the APSA, Alexander-Floyd, D’Andra Orey, and

https://www.academia.edu/3609648/Knowing_in_Space_Three_Lessons_from_Black_Women_s_Social_Theory.

56 Dotson, 2.


Brown-Dean found that marginalized groups, specifically womxn of color, remain peripheral, if acknowledged at all. Although intersectionality research is rooted in the works of Black feminists and other writers of color, Black scholars observe that it has been “co-opted” by mainstream scholars who once again alienate persons at the margins by disregarding “Black women and women of color as political actors.” Thus, Black feminist research in political science, like the study of Black politics within the discipline in general, has and continues to struggle for due regard. In addition, Black feminism faces methodological barriers at odds with mainstream political science.

Methodological Issues

Alexander-Floyd has articulated precisely many of the epistemological and methodological gatekeeping tactics Black feminist scholars confront within the discipline:

Black feminist scholars in political science who operate from postpositivist perspectives, particularly if they ascribe to qualitative or interpretive methodologies, confront overt and subtle elements of this culture of justification in political science, from being told that they cannot study Black women and politics and get a job, or that their work is not “real” political science, on the one hand to insisting that their work is not objective, that they demonstrate the replicability of their methods, or they provide “empirical” as opposed to “anecdotal” support when conducting qualitative research, pursuing narrative analysis, and/or producing theory, on the other.  

59 Alexander-Floyd, D’ Andra Orey, and Brown-Dean, 320.

What Black feminist political scientists emphatically problematize is the idea that social science research must be objective. These scholars operate from the assumption that the subjective experience of Black womxnhood is inherently political. Indeed, Harris-Perry’s book *Sister Citizen* incorporates an unapologetic use of her subjective experience to guide her research. Black womxn political scientists have successfully “challenge[d] the epistemological frameworks of political science by scrutinizing established norms of scienticism and scholarly distance.”\(^{61}\) Moreover, and in particular, “feminist scholarship has been central to questioning notions of agency and revealing the role of hidden privileges…[by] interrogat[ing] dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge and reveal[ing] the ways that these systems disadvantage subordinate groups.”\(^{62}\)

Expanding Black feminism in Political Science

Harris-Perry issues an important reminder that “the category ‘black woman political scientist’ is not equivalent to the category ‘black feminist research.’ Many black womxn in political science pursue research agendas that are not explicitly feminist, and black feminist research is not limited to work done by black women.”\(^{63}\) While one is mindful and in agreement with this statement, it must also be noted that even Black womxn scholars who do not identify as feminists have contributed to the study of Black


\(^{62}\) Harris-Lacewell, 346.

\(^{63}\) Harris-Lacewell, 342.
women and politics, and Black gender politics. All Black womxn political scientists who have incorporated an analysis of gender have cultivated a space for Black feminists to pursue their inquiries. Certainly, the theoretical and empirical roots that support the study of Black womxn and gender politics research has been refined by many of the scholars reviewed here. This dissertation is, in fact, indebted to the work of previous Black womxn working within the discipline. Their efforts allow one to build upon the scholarship on Black womxn and politics, and Black feminist thought, in political science in the exploration of Black queer feminism.

With this in mind, it can now be stated that the review of Black feminist research indicates several limitations and areas in need of expansion. Notably, the lack of attention to Black queer and trans individuals, who may also be Black womxn, remains a serious shortcoming. Despite the incorporation of the intersectional approach into political science, which facilitates the examination of multiple systems of oppression, many Black feminist scholars remain wedded to an analysis in which the effects of racism and sexism are primarily articulated through the subjectivities of cisgender and heteronormative Black womxn. At other times the focus of inquiry foregrounds race, gender, and class as the primary categories of analysis in which the effects racism, sexism, and economic vulnerability are analyzed, yet cisgender and heteronormative womxn remain the subject of analysis. Indeed, in some Black feminist scholarship, the complexity of Black womxn’s experience is reduced to “race/gender identities.”

As might be expected, “nominal inclusion of black lesbians has increased in black feminist arguments,” says Black feminist and trans male political scientist Heath Fogg Davis, “but mere reference to sexuality does not ensure the substantive inclusion of black lesbians’ experiences.”

Several studies that have demonstrated some nominal or substantive inclusion of Black lesbian and bisexual womxn, as well as nonnormative heterosexual womxn, have been conducted on the subject of HIV/AIDS. Outside of the work of Cohen, this research does not utilize a Black queer feminist analysis. By and large, scholarship on Black queer womxn remains “virtually nonexistent” within the discipline.

To be clear, I understand that scholars with varying experiences, ideological orientations (e.g. liberal vs. radical), and political commitments impart different and sometimes conflicting conceptions about power and marginalized identity. I am not suggesting that previous scholarship has been intentionally exclusive or heterosexist.

What I am attempting to highlight is how Black feminism and Black womxnhood have been primarily constructed within the discipline. There remains considerable phenomena related to the politics of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality left to explore.

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There has yet to be a body of scholarship under the banner of Black feminist political science that consistently centers sexuality and the nuances of gender categories alongside other categories of analysis. Furthermore, some Black feminists continue to focus their work on the study of formal politics, conventional political participation, and political elites (e.g. Black elected officials). While this work is paramount to understanding and explaining a subset of Black womxn and their specific political behavior, its overemphasis can serve to undergird the idea that cisgender heteronormative Black womxn represent the only other gender left to explore in the study of Black politics. Indeed, the “Black gender gap” has been defined as differences between Black “women” and Black “men,” reproducing the sociopolitical and cisgender patriarchal constructed notion that there are only two genders. In political science, focus on traditional political behavior can overshadow politics in alternative locations. These alternative locations and behaviors are equally political as they too represent spheres and activities where Black individuals must struggle for power and equitable distribution of resources.

Of note, however, is the work of Julia Jordan-Zachery and Alexander-Floyd who have been more attentive to political science work that eschews conventional research.

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70 Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 
methods and democratizes where political scientists locate data. Both scholars have have made critical epistemological and methodological interventions within political science, especially in the areas of qualitative methods and Black feminist interpretive analysis. The work of Jordan-Zachery and Alexander-Floyd helped to support the epistemic and methodological choices of this dissertation. Jordan-Zachery is also inclusive of trans womxn in a recent book publication, Shadow Bodies: Black Women, Ideology, Representation, and Politics. Using an interpretive Black feminist phenomenological frame analysis approach, Jordan-Zachery studies the intersection of Black “female” cases of domestic violence, mental illness and HIV/AIDS by examining the text of Black womxn’s magazines and Black womxn’s internet blogs, and the speeches of Black congresswomxn. Intrigued by how these issues can go unacknowledged by other Black womxn, Jordan-Zachery centers the speech and silences of Black womxn’s discourse in order to highlight how dominant understandings of Black womxnhood can render these particular Black womxn as “shadow bodies.” The concept of shadow bodies indicates that certain Black womxn “exist in a space in-


73 Jordan-Zachery, Shadow Bodies, 5.
between” such that they “are rendered shadows of other members in the Black
community as they are often vaguely represented. They are rendered invisible or visible
based on the rays of illumination that are cast on them.”74

Notwithstanding these critical interventions, Black feminist scholarship in
political science still has room to grow vis-à-vis understanding the political lives of queer
and trans persons of any gender. Modifications must be made for contemporary studies.
If Black feminist political science is restricted to cisgender and heteronormative womxn,
and investigations of gender that limit an analysis to two genders, then it is imperative
that a Black queer feminist frame of reference be developed in order to illuminate those
individuals and political experiences that remain external to certain variants of Black
feminism.

LGBTQ Political Science

Because there is limited research on queer politics within the subfield of Black
politics, this section reviews the existing literature on queer politics within the discipline
as a whole. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the investigation of the
intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality is in short supply.75 As a result, the
applicability of the existing LGBTQ politics research to the study of Black politics
remains limited due to the lack of emphasis on race. Nevertheless, the present study’s

74 Jordan-Zachery, Shadow Bodies, 4.

75 Marla Brettschneider, “LGBTQ Politics in the Discipline of Political Science,” in LGBTQ
Politics: A Critical Reader, eds. Marla Brettschneider, Susan Burgess, and Christine Keating (New York:
New York University Press, 2017), Kindle, Part II.
exploration of a Black queer feminist frame of reference is necessarily connected to the empirical and theoretical research of the LGBTQ politics subfield.

According to Marla Brettschneider, Susan Burgess, and Christine Keating, LGBTQ politics “refer[s] to struggles to end discrimination, persecution, and marginalization based on sexual orientation and gender identity.” Similar to the development of the Black politics and women and politics subfields, the study of LGBTQ politics in political science was influenced by national and global movements. The “civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements of the ’60s and ’70s, and the crisis of AIDS that followed” pushed the discipline to broaden itself, though, as Martha Ackelsberg makes clear, political science remains one of the more conservative fields within the social sciences. Research in this subfield questions and seeks to uncover the gender norms and heteronormative assumptions that underlie ideologies, morality, and governance. In other words, LGBTQ politics research foregrounds how social and political institutions construct, maintain, and enforce norms related to gender and sexuality.

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A point often overlooked by political scientists is, for instance, how public policy is formulated to reinforce sexual regulation in the United States. Trends in LGBTQ politics research include, though are not limited to, critiques of marriage and the political construction of the nuclear heteropatriarchal family, queer theory and constitutional interpretation, the rights of transgender citizens, religious intolerance, and debates on the merits of liberal LGBT rights based frameworks and radical queer activism.

Much of the scholarship dedicated to researching and theorizing about LGBTQ politics has only occurred within the last fifteen years. This reflects ideological shifts that have taken place within American culture as well as the organizing efforts of LGBTQ political scientists. Notwithstanding these recent developments, too often “heteronormativity has been equated with political neutrality.” These presumptions influence the discipline’s inquiries into political phenomena as heterosexist prejudices are routinely unacknowledged. Angelia Wilson reminds political scientists of the heterosexism present within the discipline and how these prejudices and discriminatory behaviors hinder LGBTQ scholarship and thus knowledge production. Because the

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80 Wilson and Burgess, 337-81.

81 Brettschneider, Burgess, and Keating, Introduction.


recognition of this scholarship remains a struggle, scholars researching queer and trans
issues may even find it more difficult to secure employment as their area of work is
trivialized.  

Methodological Issues

LGBTQ scholars have attested to the methodological barriers of behavioralist and
rational-choice approaches, paralleling the objections of Black/feminist political
scientists. While some scholars have chosen to model their research within the
“traditional” boundaries of the discipline, other scholars note that the lack of normative
theoretical approaches in the study of LGBTQ politics impoverishes what we can know
about the politics of gender and sexuality. In view of the fact that feminist theory and
queer theory overlap, it should be no surprise that LGBTQ or queer political theory has
sought to combine both to further political science research. As Jyl Josephson and Thais
Marques write, “the discipline needs to treat the questions raised by queer feminist
political theory as questions fundamental to the study of politics.”

84 Angélica R. Wilson, “Our Stories,” in LGBTQ Politics: A Critical Reader, eds. Marla
Kindle, Chapter 9.


Political Science Research.” in LGBTQ Politics: A Critical Reader, eds. Marla Brettschneider, Susan

87 Josephson and Marques, Chapter 13.

88 Josephson and Marques, Chapter 13.
whose work is the focus of one of the case studies in this dissertation, has explained that queer theory “focuses on and makes central not only the socially constructed nature of sexuality and sexual categories, but also the varying degrees and multiple sites of power distributed within all categories of sexuality, including the normative categories of heterosexuality.”

Despite the potential of this and similar theories originating in feminist and queer studies, political science has yet to make full use of the explanatory power of these frameworks. Moreover, Black political scientists in particular have yet to critically engage with the works of Black queer feminists. Josephson and Marques urge the discipline to remodel itself instead of merely applying orthodox epistemologies and methods to questions concerning queer and trans politics. In their own words, “focusing on empirical research is a way to not change as a discipline, even as you are ‘incorporating’ empirical study of LGBTQ politics.”

**Towards A Black Queer Feminist Political Science**

Like the subfields of Black politics, and Black women and politics, the study of LGBTQ politics within political science continues to be marginalized. In addition to encountering questions of legitimacy regarding LGBTQ scholarship, some queer and trans political scientists continue to confront gender and sexual identity discrimination

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90 Josephson and Marques, Chapter 13.
with their academic departments. One can only speculate about the compounded discrimination that queer and trans political scientists of color must face, as research concerning these scholars is scant. In general, the study of LGBTQ politics along lines of race has not been prioritized, whereas more mainstream LGBTQ analysis, such as scholarship devoted to the examination to same-gender marriage, has been given more attention. Furthermore, transgender persons and trans political behavior remain neglected in LGBTQ political science studies. Although the subfields of Black politics, Black women and politics, and LGBTQ politics all claim to embrace an intersectional approach, all of these subfields present deficiencies. Only certain identities and phenomena have been given meaningful attention within these areas of study. While discriminatory attitudes towards certain persons and phenomena are present throughout the discipline, it is also possible that due to the absence of, or inadequacy in, existing frames of reference that particular persons and phenomena are not made visible.

The review of the literature on Black politics has displayed that the subfield remains narrow, and possibly contributes to the obscuration, if not erasure, of Black communities that undoubtedly possess political agency and influence political phenomena. When any group is systematically underrepresented within a discipline or subfield it becomes imperative for scholars to begin to question why this is so and how it

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91 Brettschneider, Part II.

92 Brettschneider, Part II.

93 Brettschneider, Part II; Barry L. Tadlock and Jami K. Taylor, “Where Has the Field Gone?”, Chapter 12.
can be addressed. Given the above disciplinary circumstances and limitations, a Black queer feminist frame of reference is in order. Not only does this frame of reference have the potential to fill the gaps of the present sparsity of research on Black queer and trans political experience, the frame will also continue in the activist-scholar tradition by creating counter-hegemonic knowledge production, challenging the established methodological orthodoxy within political science, and working to foster a more just world.

This dissertation is devoted to examining an important theoretical and empirical gap by exploring the works of, and critically engaging with, Black feminist theorists who have addressed queer and trans subjects and subjectivities in Black politics. The theorists chosen for study, Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen, both share a distinctive Black queer feminist lens that informs and defines their activism and writing on Black womxn, Black gender politics, and Black LGBTQ politics. I argue that a Black queer feminist frame of reference has the potential to radicalized political science, and the Black politics subfield in particular, by centering the political realities of non-normative Black people.

Moreover, a Black queer feminist frame of reference necessarily combines the epistemological and methodological innovation of the Black politics subfield (including Black women and politics, and Black gender politics), in addition to the more mainstream subfields of women and politics, and LGBTQ politics. Of course, this frame may also contribute to new ways of knowing and investigating political inquiries.

Although Black queer feminism is an ongoing project, theoretical paradigm, and praxis, it has not been thoroughly analyzed within the discipline of political science. The
case studies to be examined in this dissertation are an attempt to explore the elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference and inquire into the possibility of Black queer feminism for the advancement of the study of Black politics. In addition to incorporating interdisciplinary scholarship (by bringing gender and sexuality studies into Black politics), this study also attempts to center race more prominently into LGBTQ politics research within the discipline. A Black queer feminist frame for the study of Black politics is explored and constructed from the political thought by activist-scholars examined in the case studies herein. Because political science has yet to identify and interpret the key elements of Black queer feminism, one of the implicit questions this study asks is, what does a Black feminist lens become and illuminate when we take seriously gender diversity and non-normative sexualities?

While the principles of Black feminist thought underlie Black queer feminism, Black queer feminism pushes the entire paradigm further. Theorists and activists who work from a Black queer feminist frame of reference have a notable radical commitment. That is, they seek to transform the sociopolitical order, not merely reform or find a place for marginalized groups within the existing systems. The eradication of racial, gender, and class oppression is coupled with the struggle against cisgender patriarchical domination. Critically engaging with the political works of Black queer feminists will inform the future of Black studies in political science.
CHAPTER III
FRAMES OF REFERENCE IN BLACK POLITICAL SCIENCE

This dissertation builds upon the extant frames of reference generated by other Black political scientists, such as Alexander-Floyd, Evelyn M. Simien, and Mack H. Jones. Stated differently, this study expands the extant frames that were developed by Black political scientists, especially Black Feminist political scientists. In research studies, frames of reference or theoretical frameworks serve as an organizational and explanatory tool, as well as a guide for one’s research. The frames of reference that guide the present research are rooted generally in Black feminisms. The exploration of a Black queer feminist frame of reference is akin to the exploration of a particular variant of Black feminism.

The underlying paradigm of Black queer feminism is derived from Black feminist thought, a social and political theory with its own epistemological and ontological assumptions, as well as a worldview that originates from the experiences and subjectivities of Black womxn. Yet Black womxn are not a monolith: just as all Black womxn are not feminists, all Black feminists do not share the same ideological space and political commitments (nor are they all womxn). Indeed, it is most accurate to speak of Black feminisms, a multifaceted ideological and theoretical space in which there are numerous (and sometimes conflicting) beliefs, ideals, and political commitments. Black
feminisms encompass a range of thought and methods across multiple academic fields, in addition to ideas that arise directly from on the ground community organizing. Black queer feminism in particular further derives its explanatory power from Black queer and trans thought, though it must be stressed that Black feminisms and Black queer and trans thought cannot be neatly separated.¹

Black feminist political scientists have developed specific frames of reference that attempt to capture this essence, as well as facilitate studies on Black women and politics, and Black gender politics. Black feminists, as well as other Black scholars in the discipline, have critiqued the prevailing frames in Black politics studies that tend to obscure the diversity of standpoints and communities related to Black political life. In this chapter, I outline three established frames of reference within Black political science that are relevant to the current study. I begin with Mack H. Jones, who introduced the “dominant-subordinate group model” frame, as a point of departure for frames conceived by Black feminist political scientists. After identifying the limitations of Jones, I move to outline frames envisioned by Black feminists in the discipline, specifically Evelyn M. Simien’s conceptual framework for “Black feminist consciousness,” and Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd’s “radical Black feminist frame of reference.” Critiques of each frame are presented to underline how there remains a need to for alternative Black feminist

frames of reference in order to expand the scholarship in Black feminist political science research. To conclude, a brief explanation is provided to elucidate why it remains necessary to specifically explore a Black queer feminist frame of reference for the study of Black politics.

**The Dominant-Subordinate Group Model**

In *African Americans and the American Political System*, Barker, Jones, and Tate explain that a frame of reference is a “particular approach” used to comprehend socio-political activity. A frame of reference guides one’s focus and observations, and “in that sense[,] it illuminates our understanding, like a lens.” A frame of reference has both descriptive and prescriptive aspects: it is employed to describe the current state of Black politics and to suggest future courses of action that move Black Americans towards justice. As briefly mentioned in the review of literature, in the essay “A Frame of Reference for Black Politics” (1972), Jones presents a framework to guide comprehension of Black political experience. For Jones, the essence of Black politics is the power struggle between Black and white Americans, as well as the struggles between

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3 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 6.

4 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 6.
groups inside the Black community who hold diverse positions about the foci of a unified Black policy agenda.⁵

This power struggle was illuminated by way of the “dominant-submissive group model,” initially conceived in 1972 for scholars of Black politics to frame their studies. Jones would later modify the designation of this frame to the dominant-subordinate group model as “the author…concluded that the term ‘subordinate’ is more appropriate than ‘submissive’.”⁶ There are four dimensions of the dominant-subordinate group model. The first two are described as “intrafactual competition in [Black and white] communities”; that is, conflict within Black and white communities.⁷ According to Jones, in the Black community intrafactual competition manifests in the different “goal-directed patterns of activity.”⁸ This can be observed in the differing policy outlooks held by individuals seeking civil rights (i.e. integration), versus those individuals whose goals fall under the “Black Nationalist pattern” in which they “disabuse themselves of all feelings of belonging in the U.S. government and substitute instead the notion that they are part of a different nation—a black nation. Population transfer is the basic policy orientation of this faction.”⁹

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⁶ Barker, Jones, and Tate, 30.

⁷ Jones, 9.

⁸ Jones, 8.

⁹ Jones, 12.
The third dimensions of the dominant-subordinate group model “involves competition across group lines,” indicating the competition and racial conflict that occurs between Black and white Americans. The fourth dimension is the synthesis of the first three dimensions, which is “reflected in the authoritative policy decisions.” Jones states that the dominant-subordinate group model can be applied to observable patterns in U.S. society as an analytical framework to explain Black politics.

Limitations of the Dominant-Subordinate Group Model

Jones acknowledges that there may be alternative understandings of the same reality that are illuminated by other frames of reference. The dominate-subordinate group model does not, for instance, give scholars of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics sufficient sociopolitical context to investigate and theorize about nonnormative Black communities (of course this was not the intent of Jones’s frame of reference either). From the standpoint of a Black queer feminist, a critical limitation of Jones’s frame is that it provides no illumination or recognition of power struggles within and between genders and between those with heterosexual privilege and those without. These power struggles, too, result in the domination and subordination of some groups both intra-racially and interracially. Stated differently, the dominate-subordinate group model does not give scholars of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics a sufficient frame

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10 Jones, 9.

11 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 5.
to investigate and address the policy preferences of those individuals and groups who experience “secondary marginalization.”

Moreover, this frame assumes a Black-white binary with “race first” assumptions, further demonstrating who (Black cisgender heteronormative men) and what (concerns defended by this particular group) are considered most relevant. Fortunately, Jones states that this frame is suggestive and encourages scholars to continue to explore, inviting those from different standpoints to contend for alternative, and more inclusive, frames of reference. Jones even recognizes that the dominate-subordinate group model is limited by its lack of attention to the economic reality of most Black Americans.

The critiques mentioned here mirror the critiques put forward by other political scientists vis-à-vis Black politics scholarship, including Black feminist political scientists such as Cathy J. Cohen, Simien, and Alexander-Floyd. While frames of reference that center the power struggle between Black and white Americans have helped to guide inquiries into Black political phenomena, these frames have been considered unsatisfactory for scholars seeking to study womxn, gender and sexuality. Thus, Black feminist political scientists have built upon them. These scholars, along with their conceptualizations, will be the subject for the remainder of this chapter.


13 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 11.
Black Feminist Consciousness

Simien outlines the conceptual framework for contemplating “black feminist consciousness.”¹⁴ Simien’s work seeks to help guide inquiries into Black Women’s Studies in political science with particular regard to the “ways in which black feminist theory can inform quantitative analyses of black attitudes toward gender equality and feminist priorities.”¹⁵ Thus, her research focuses on providing an alternative framework for measuring public opinion and political behavior in Black communities. Simien derives four themes that define Black feminist consciousness from the Black feminist literature to conceptualize to Black feminist consciousness.

This first centers the intersectional experiences of Black womxn, noting that race, gender, class, and sexuality are experienced simultaneously.¹⁶ Paramount to this theme is the emphasis that Black womxn cannot choose single-issue struggles because oppression is experienced in a manner that is interlocking. The second theme to this frame recognizes the intra-community sexism that exists between “black male-female relationships.”¹⁷ The third theme asserts that Black feminism moves the Black community forward and benefits Black liberation efforts due to its ability to provide an analysis of multiple oppressions (i.e. an intersectional analysis) with the goal of bringing

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about social justice. The final theme presumes that Black womxn experience “linked fate” with other Black womxn due to shared realities of multiple oppressions. In other words, there is “a sense of belonging or conscious loyalty to [other Black womxn that] arises from everyday experiences with race, class, and gender oppression.” 18

Simien aims to underscore the necessity of Black feminism in political science as a lens to explain and understand Black American politics. 19 Again, Simien’s research is specific to quantitative analyses that can “challenge the ways in which political scientists have traditionally defined and conceptualized group consciousness as either race or gender consciousness.” 20 In one instance, Simien investigates the “gender gap” in Black feminist consciousness by way of survey data from the 1993–1994 National Black Politics Study and the 2004–2005 National Black Feminist Study that she states “address the core of black feminist thought.” 21 She operationalizes Black feminist consciousness through the concept of intersectionality, for example, via questions that capture participants’ attitudes about “whether racism, poverty, and sexual discrimination were linked together and should be addressed by the black community”; and “whether black women suffered from both sexism within the black movement and racism within the

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18 Simien, Black Feminist Voices in Politics, 11.

19 Simien, Black Feminist Voices in Politics, 1.

20 Simien, Black Feminist Voices in Politics, 7; emphasis added.

women’s movement.” Simien finds that although the attitudes of Black men are “more liberal and progressive” than Black womxn, “black feminists have been successful at galvanizing a mass following that actively participates in politics.”

**The Radical Black Feminist Frame of Reference**

More recently, Alexander-Floyd has articulated a frame of reference for the study of Black women and politics, and Black gender politics. A “radical Black feminist frame of reference,” says Alexander-Floyd, is a frame built from interdisciplinary Black feminist concepts, methods, and research approaches in the service of “social and epistemic justice.” This radical Black feminist frame of reference represents a particular epistemological standpoint for the study of “Black political women, specifically within political science.” Alexander-Floyd identifies important questions and considerations related to the development of this frame:

> What are the different questions that are enabled when we center Black women in research? What are the different epistemological questions raised? What are the challenges to and successful strategies for publishing research on Black women?

It is important to underscore that Black women and politics / Black gender politics as a subfield within political science is not something that can be clearly delineated with a specific framework that is intuitive or immediately knowable.

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25 Alexander-Floyd, 63.
According to Alexander-Floyd, the two “key elements” to the radical Black feminist frame of reference include: 1) “an insistence on exploring the historically and contextually specific ways in which gender operates in the context of ideology, institutions, and social practices” and, similar to Simien’s first theme of Black feminist consciousness, 2) “a constitutive model of identity that examines race, gender, class, and other elements of identity as mutually constitutive and productive categories.”27 The radical Black feminist frame’s activist-scholar orientation is demonstrated by its “priority on justice as a central political value and goal.”28 This frame additionally prioritizes attending to intra-community differences.

After introducing this frame of reference, Alexander-Floyd engages in an analytical discussion and contends that one of the implications of the radical Black feminist perspective is that it supports a more rigorous analysis that transcends and troubles less daring epistemic frameworks. As an example, she points to liberal feminist frameworks focused on “efforts to remove formal barriers to participation and issues on descriptive representation.”29 Alternatively, a radical Black feminist frame of reference

26 Alexander-Floyd, 63-64, emphasis added.

27 Alexander-Floyd, 64.

28 Alexander-Floyd, 65.

29 Alexander-Floyd, 66.
uses social science research “to transform institutional practices and material outcomes for Black women and their communities and society as a whole.”\textsuperscript{30}

Limitations of Black Feminist Frames

Both Simien’s and Alexander-Floyd’s frames demonstrate a continuing limitation of Black feminism in political science in which race and gender are viewed as the primary categories of analysis, despite the fact that their own explanations mention sexuality and other categories as imperative to Black womxn’s experiences. As Black feminist and trans male political scientist Heath Fogg Davis states:

Black feminists use this paradigmatic bifurcation as the foundation for a black feminist epistemology or standpoint, which they in turn use to illustrate and critique the commingling of racism and sexism as it impacts various aspects of black women’s lives. Many of these arguments have nonetheless been equivocal in articulating how sexual [and gender] diversity among black women might modify the basic intersection between race and sex.\textsuperscript{31}

Furthermore, while Alexander-Floyd instructs researchers to guard against liberal feminist frameworks and to challenge orthodoxy within the discipline,\textsuperscript{32} Black feminist political scientists have nevertheless produced scholarship appearing to take on a liberal feminist orientation,\textsuperscript{33} and/or that reproduces methodological rigidity.\textsuperscript{34} Simien, in fact,

\textsuperscript{30} Alexander-Floyd, 66.


\textsuperscript{32} Davis, 59.


equates Black feminist consciousness to liberal attitudes.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, while operating under a Black feminist framework, there is no radical disruption of the existing ideological state of affairs that champion liberal equality, nor is Black political science scholarship pushed to think beyond the confines of American liberalism.

Simien’s ideas concerning the employment of Black feminist theory in political science is also limited by its methodological scope which mirrors traditional political science methods and studies limited to attitudinal research. Black queer feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs additionally notes that while the quantitative study Simien uses to expound Black feminist consciousness is “inspired and useful,” the “women” participants described in the research are those “people who have already answered affirmatively to a very binary question about what possible meaning their life has in relationship to the political category of gender.”\textsuperscript{36} This points to a shortcoming of the study, insofar that the study includes unaccounted assumptions about gender as it attempts to measure and reveal insight about gender and Black feminist consciousness. This binary understanding of Black gender politics is a recurrent limitation within the established Black feminist political science literature.

\textsuperscript{35} Simien, “A Black Gender Gap?”, 135.

As noted previously, the “Black gender gap” has been defined as differences between Black “women” and Black “men,” who are presumably cisgender, which reproduces the sociopolitical and heteronormative constructed notion that there are only two genders. Though Alexander-Floyd’s frame of reference makes space for an intersectional analysis of our political world, it leaves unanswered questions about the inclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming people, provoking further queries concerning unacknowledged cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions vis-à-vis Black womxn. Within most Black feminist political science work, gender and the political category “women” is undertheorized resulting in the invisibility, and sometimes erasure of transgender and gender nonconforming persons, who may also be Black womxn.

One disagrees, therefore, that either Black feminist frame presents an “optimal basis for Black women’s and gender studies in political science.” Nonetheless, Alexander-Floyd’s frame in particular is a point of departure for other variants of Black feminist political thought to emerge as frames of reference within the discipline, as there are few frames that can provide concepts and explanations that speak to the political nuances and complexities of racialized nonnormative genders and sexualities.

To be sure, I am aware that some of these issues may be explained by an incongruence between previous scholarship and our evolving contemporary


38 Alexander-Floyd, “Radical Black Feminism.” 64.
understandings of gender and sexuality, as well as generational differences with regard to
understandings, articulations, and implications of power and nonnormative identity. As
noted previously, there may also be differing ideological and political commitments that
influence how scholars take account of the diversity of Black womxn in their scholarship.
I am not asserting that previous feminist frames of reference are intentionally exclusive
or cis heterosexist. What I am attempting to highlight is how Black feminist political
scientists have tended to do political science work; that is, think about and construct
Black feminism, Black womxn, and Black gender politics within and for the discipline.
Although speculative, I do believe that most, if not all, of the identified Black feminist
political scientists in this dissertation would support the concept of Black queer feminism
within the discipline.

Notwithstanding the above clarification, the issues of the existing frames result in
a problem for scholars who wish to study marginalized subjects within Black
communities as there are few frames that can provide concepts and explanations that
speak to contemporary realities. Nonetheless, the frames created by Black feminist
political scientists have contributed to the entrance and legitimation of Black feminist
epistemologies and methodologies within the discipline. The inability of these frames to
fully capture the contemporary state of racialized gender and sexuality politics enabled
the current study to explore a Black queer feminist frame of reference for the
advancement of the study of Black politics.
CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore and critically examine Black queer feminist activist scholarship, relevant to the study and practice of Black politics in the United States, in order to develop a more expansive frame of reference to ground and direct future political science inquiries, especially those concerning Black queer and trans political experience. It has been argued that Black queer and trans individuals and groups remain overlooked within political science scholarship, thus the need for an alternative frame of reference to make these imperative political realities more visible. This dissertation builds upon the extant frames of reference that were developed by Black political scientists, especially Black feminist political scientists. The primary research question that guided this dissertation asked, *how might a Black queer feminist frame of reference explain the nature of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience?*

In order to answer this question, it was necessary to determine the elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference. By doing so, this study entered into a larger debate about the conceptualization of Black queer feminism. I explored multiple cases of Black queer feminism via the activist scholarship of two Black queer womxn: Barbara
A qualitative content analysis was relied upon to examine their activist scholarship with the objective of ascertaining and synthesizing the constituent elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference from their political thought. Upon answering the primary research question, I was able to ascertain what this particular frame of reference might entail, and further interpret possible implications of how it can inform the study of Black politics. These implications are discussed in Chapter VI as a contribution to the discipline that is offered by this study.

**Feminist Methodologies**

This dissertation is grounded in multiple feminist methodologies. This means that feminist epistemologies, principles, and imperatives informed the research, chosen methods, and analysis. Although specific frameworks created by Black feminist political scientists have prompted and guided the inquiries related to this study, a general comment on the larger sphere of feminist epistemologies and methodologies is necessary to demonstrate the collective objectives of feminist research(ers), including those attentive to gender variance, sexual identity, and race. Feminist methodologies are always political.

Feminist scholars Mary Fonow and Judith Cook have outlined the five principles that generally encapsulate feminist methodologies:

- first, the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of

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1 The conclusions drawn in this study are not definitive. They are suggestive of one possible interpretation of a Black queer feminist frame of reference, as this was an exploratory research project. For more on exploratory research, see Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011): 95.
gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life, including the conduct of research; second, the centrality of consciousness-raising or debunking as a specific methodological tool and as a general orientation or way of seeing; third, challenging the norm of objectivity that assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from each other and that personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific; fourth, concern for the ethical implications of feminist research and recognition of the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge; and finally, emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research and research results.\(^2\)

For the purposes of this dissertation, it was important to emphasize that gender asymmetry also includes the hierarchy of gender privilege in which cisgender womxn and men have access to more power and resources than transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Austin H. Johnson, noting the absence of scholarly literature attending to transgender persons and a lack of trans inclusive feminist methodologies, has proposed a Transfeminist methodology. Transfeminist methodology is attentive to the ways in which cisgender privilege is often reified in research studies and thereby makes explicit commitments to center transgender persons and subject matter with the goal of producing knowledge towards greater gender equity for persons across all gender identities and expressions.\(^3\)

I shared and advanced this research objective for this discipline of political science. Although I did not examine the activist scholarship of trans persons specifically,

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this study was both attentive and committed to elevating trans and gender nonconforming persons and subject matter by challenging binary and cisnormative understandings of gender within political science. I further recognized that Black queer womxn have historically disrupted normative gender expectations, often embracing gender nonconformity and challenging hegemonic gender and sexual norms. Cohen has maintained, for instance, that Black lesbians of the 1970s and 80s initiated a political project in which “they struggled with, and gave name to, reimagining gender nonconformity, reimagining sexual identity, intimacy and chosen family.”

Black feminists, too, have generated theories in an effort to create more expansive feminist methodological standpoints. Critical social theorist Patricia Hill Collins has presented a thorough explanation of Black feminist epistemology in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Within this text, Collins elucidated that because white males govern the validity of knowledge, Black womxn’s experiences are subsequently unrecognizable or disqualified as legitimate ways of knowing. As a result, Black womxn’s knowledges become subjugated. Moreover, the academy further demands Black womxn subordinate the insight derived from our daily realities for Eurocentric epistemologies in order to be judged as “serious academics.” As accurately pointed out by Collins, “many black

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women are not seen as credible witness for our own experiences."\textsuperscript{6} Collins presented an

exacting critique of the epistemic elitism located within positivism, which dubiously makes claim to an “objective” standpoint.

As an alternative to hegemonic theories of knowledge, Collins offered the four tenets of \textit{Black feminist epistemology}: 1) lived experienced as a criterion of meaning, 2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, 3) the ethics of caring, and 4) the ethic of personal accountability. First, when using lived experience as a criterion of meaning, Collins signified the deep consideration that is given to the wisdom found within Black feminist ways of knowing. This wisdom is acquired though life experience as a Black womxn located within U.S. empire in which Black womxn confront multiple modes of oppression.\textsuperscript{7} Stated differently, it is this lived experience that provides Black womxn with a particular epistemological standpoint. Secondly, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims encourages conversations among subjects, guarding against the othering of individuals so often seen in western thought. The third element of Black feminist epistemology foregrounds the ethic of caring in which one recognizes “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process.”\textsuperscript{8} The ethics of caring appreciates “individual uniqueness,” “emotions in dialogues” and “the capacity for empathy.”\textsuperscript{9} Finally, Black feminist epistemology prioritizes an ethic of

\textsuperscript{6} Collins, 255.

\textsuperscript{7} Collins, 257.

\textsuperscript{8} Collins, 263.

\textsuperscript{9} Collins, 263
personal accountability in which persons are expected to be “accountable for their knowledge claims.”

Taken together, these feminist methodologies provided a firm foundation for this study. These feminist epistemologies, principles, and imperatives enlightened my chosen methods and analytical strategy.

Reflexivity in the Research Process

Feminist research values the subjectivity of the researcher and encourages scholars to situate themselves (their history, culture, interests, assumptions, etc.) within their research process. This dissertation was certainly not a disembodied project. It was a deeply affective exploration of scholarship, activism, and myself. Without question, I continue to contemplate and explore my own positionality and identities, particularly vis-à-vis genderqueer/gender nonconforming and queer sexual identities, as well as the ideas of womxnhood. Furthermore, I am perpetually questioning the (in)authenticity and political significance of normative heterosexuality, given its compulsory nature via support and deployment by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal powers and agendas.

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10 Collins, 265.


Black queer feminists, along with queer and trans feminists of color generally, have been instrumental to both my personal and political development. Indeed, disrupting the cisgendered patriarchal system is a political commitment that informs my personal identity. And, as feminists repeatedly make clear, “the personal is political.”

This dissertation was as much about developing a frame of reference for the study of Black queer and trans politics as it was about creating a space for myself within a discipline that has historically been hostile to Black Americans, all womxn, and all queer and trans persons. To undertake such a dissertation project was to engage in the deliberate praxis of writing the type of activist scholarship that I wished to see, in an attempt to make myself and my research interests legible and “legitimate” within political science.

The desire to see similar positionalities, and the political analyses that such standpoints bring forth, as the subject of a political science project influenced the specific methods utilized to answer my research question. Because I was interested in exploring Black queer feminist political thought, I chose methods that allowed me to center the ideas of Black queer womxn. For this study, exploratory cases of Black queer feminist activist scholarship examined via a qualitative content analysis, and guided by feminist methodological principles attentive to race, gender variance, and sexual identity in the research and knowledge generation process, allowed me to accomplish this endeavor. Like Black feminist political scientist Julia Jordan-Zachery, whose research also employs feminist methodology and elevates qualitative and interpretive inquiry, my research is not meant to convey “a singular truth,” but rather “seeks to produce one of many possible
ways of analyzing and interpreting data” with regard to Black queer feminism.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Multiple Case Study Method}

This study employed exploratory case studies. Researchers undertake exploratory projects for a number of reasons, including the quest for a more thorough understanding of a topic.\textsuperscript{14} This dissertation project sought to explore Black queer feminism to better understand the potential role of a Black queer feminist frame of reference for political science studies. In order to do so, two case studies of Black queer feminist activist scholarship were selected and investigated via qualitative content analysis (detailed further in forthcoming pages). According to Janet Johnson and H.T. Reynolds, authors of \textit{Political Science Research Methods}, in multiple case study analyses, “cases are chosen for the presence or absence of factors that a political theory has indicated are important.”\textsuperscript{15}

The cases chosen for the present study were selected based on their Black feminist orientation as well as theoretical and activist commitments to the study and advancement of knowledge around issues of sexuality. That is, the work of Smith and Cohen represent two instances, or cases, of Black queer feminist activist scholarship. As


a feminist dissertation project, I believe Black womxn to be the experts of their own experiences and identities. Therefore, I relied on Smith’s and Cohen’s own self-definitions as Black, lesbian, queer, and feminist when determining the cases to select. I also trusted, and thus was confident in, their self-descriptions of their work as rooted in Black feminist and Black queer traditions. Furthermore, my own prior knowledge about the distinct subject(s) of the work of these two activist-scholars provided me with a useful starting point when surveying their scholarship as potentially useful data for examination in a study concerning Black queer feminist political thought.

While Cohen is a political scientist, Smith’s academic background is located within English (Black literature) and Black Women’s Studies. Although Smith is not a political scientist, she is nevertheless a critical political theorist who has made clear in her writing and activism that Black feminism is a political movement, and that Black feminist thought is a political theory. Smith is also one of the pioneering Black queer feminists whose work has contributed to, and is indeed foundational to, what is today named as Black queer feminism. In fact, Cohen names Smith as one of the foremothers whose activism and scholarship evinces a clear Black queer feminist genealogy. Smith’s work was thus well suited for close examination in a political science study.

16 Collins, 255.


Black feminist scholarship, in any discipline, necessities moving outside one’s field as
Black feminist thought is not confined to any one academic discipline. Stated differently,
Black feminist research is always already interdisciplinary in nature. Both activist-
scholars continue to work as community activists (see more detailed background
information below). These two cases were examined in order to capture the
multidimensionality and interdisciplinary aspects of a Black queer feminist frame.

Political scientists Juliet Kaarbo and Ryan Beasley have emphasized that case
studies can be qualitative, quantitative, or opt to incorporate both research methods to
facilitate the researcher’s investigation. Qualitative unobtrusive case studies are ideal
for investigations in which a researcher does not have access to funding for travel and/or
physical proximity to the subjects or phenomena that concern the investigation. The
current study makes use of qualitative cases studies to facilitate an in-depth exploration
of Black queer feminist scholarship and activism that cannot be grasped by relying solely
on quantitative methods. Furthermore, by examining how the cases interact with and
direct modifications for the application of Black feminist theory in political science, I was
able to ascertain the particularities of a Black queer feminist frame. That is, I was able to
discern how Smith and Cohen queer the Black feminist frame of reference, and, by doing
so, how Smith and Cohen illuminate overlooked or marginalized Black political subjects
and Black political phenomena.


20 Ifeyinwa E. Umerah-Udezulu, “The State as Capitalist Patriarchy: Women and Politics in Developing Countries” (PhD Diss., Clark Atlanta University, 1995): 38.
Advantages and Limitations

In order to keep this study manageable, only two Black queer feminists were examined. To be sure, there are other Black womxn and womxn of color who could be analyzed. Thus, the conclusions drawn by this study are suggestive of the nature of Black queer feminist politics and a Black queer feminist frame, as further critical engagement with other theorists is still needed. It is suggested that future studies that focus on topics related to Black queer/queer of color feminist politics continue to explore the works of other activist-scholars. At the same time, the use of two case studies was sufficient to support the reliability of this study. According to Robert Yin, author of *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, using multiple case studies, opposed to just one case study, increases reliability in a study.\(^{21}\) In other words, having two or more cases strengthens consistency by illustrating the same idea more than once.

While examining two cases is advantageous for concerns related to reliability, it is equally a limitation in terms of validity because it raises questions about the ability to definitively conceptualize Black queer feminism from only two instances. This specific type of validity is noted as content validity. Thus, I must acknowledge that my study has attempted to construct a frame of reference by looking only to the activist scholarship of lesbian identified womxn. I did not examine scholars of trans experience, nor have I investigated the activist scholarship of non-binary theorists. Queer masculine perspectives on Black feminism were also not prioritized in this study. There is certainly

more to explore in future studies as no one study can ever be the final say on a particular issue. Nonetheless, the benefits of this study outweighed any limitations. As feminist political philosopher Martha Ackelsberg writes, “a study of LGBT activism can provide valuable case studies to expand our understanding of the range and content of U.S. political life.”

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**Background of Cases**

**Barbara Smith**

Barbara Smith is an independent scholar, activist, and former publisher and elected official. She is the author of *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, and *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith* (edited by Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks). Smith is additionally the co-editor of *Conditions: Five, The Black Women's Issue* (with Lorraine Bethel), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott), and the editor of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Smith’s articles have been published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *Souls: Critical Journal of Black Politics and Culture*, *Off Our Backs: A Women’s Newsjournal*, the *Women’s Studies Newsletter*, the *Nation*, and the *New York Times*.

Smith has been a Scholar-in-Residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in

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Black Culture, a fellow at the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, and a Rockefeller fellow in the humanities at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at CUNY.\textsuperscript{23} She is also the co-founder of The Combahee River Collective (with Cessie Alfonso, Cheryl Clarke, Demita Frazier, Gloria Akasha Hull, Eleanor Johnson, Audre Lorde, Chirlane McCray, Margo Okazawa Rey, Sharon Page Ritchie, and Beverly Smith); and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (with Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Myrna Bain, Mariana Roma-Carmona, Rosario Morales, Ana Oliveira, Alma Gómez, Helena Byard, Susan Yung, Rosie Alvarez, and Leota Lone Dog).\textsuperscript{24} Smith was additionally a lead organizer for the international conference “Black Nations / Queer Nations?” She has participated in numerous organizations including the Black Radical Congress, African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, and the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. She also served two terms as an elected official on the Albany (New York) Common Council (2006-2013).

Cathy J. Cohen

Cathy J. Cohen is the David and Mary Winton Green Professor at the University of Chicago. She has additionally served as the Deputy Provost for Graduate Education

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Barbara Smith, \textit{Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith}, eds. Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks (New York: State University of New York, 2014), 139.
\end{itemize}
and the Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago. She has authored two books, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* and *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, and co-edited the anthology *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader* (with Kathleen Jones and Joan Tronto). Cohen’s articles have been published in the American Political Science Review, Perspectives on Politics, NOMOS, GLQ, Social Text, and the Du Bois Review. She is also the founder and principal investigator of the Black Youth Project and GenForward Survey.

Cohen has served as a board member for the Audre Lorde Project, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at CUNY, the Arcus Foundation, and the Black Youth Project 100. In addition, she was a lead organizer for the international conference “Black Nations / Queer Nations?”. She has participated in various organizations including Black AIDS Mobilization (BAM!), the Black Radical Congress, African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, ACT UP New York, and Ella’s Daughters.²⁵

**Data Collection and Qualitative Content Analysis**

To facilitate data collection and analysis I relied on a qualitative content analysis strategy. Feminist researchers define content analysis as “the systematic study of texts

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and other cultural products or nonliving data forms.”26 A content analysis can be qualitative or quantitative and may incorporate a range of texts, artifacts, and media for examination, “including, but not limited to historical documents, newspapers, magazines, photographs, books, diaries, literature, music, cinema, television, and Web sites.”27 The feminist approach to content analysis expands where researchers may locate data rich sources while articulating a specifically feminist practice of engaging with that data. This dissertation utilized qualitative content analysis to investigate textual data (books, interview transcript documents, and articles) and archived audio and visual digital media (podcasts, speeches and lectures, webinars, and interviews) pertaining to the activist scholarship of Smith and Cohen. The examination of these materials allowed me to critically engage with and analyze the political thought and activism of two Black queer womxn scholars, and interpret how such thought and activism informs a Black queer feminist frame of reference.

In order to explore a Black queer feminist frame of reference it was necessary to examine the political thought of Black queer feminists by way of their activist scholarship. Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey “define activist scholarship as the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with,  


27 Leavy, 229
and in the service of, progressive social movements."²⁸ Smith’s and Cohen’s activist scholarship is generated within the context of their continued roles as both educators and community activists. By examining Smith’s and Cohen’s activist scholarship I was able to observe the political concepts and theories that undergird what can be called a Black queer feminist frame of reference for the study of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics within political science.

Utilizing content analysis allowed me to systematically study a variety of textual and media sources to obtain insights about Black queer feminism. As a qualitative research project, this study did not rely on counting (as would be used in quantitative inquiry). Instead, this study sought to locate ideas and assess their meaning. As stated previously, my research is not meant to convey “a singular truth,” but rather “seeks to produce one of many possible ways of analyzing and interpreting data” with regard to Black queer feminism.²⁹

Feminist researchers understand that texts and other data sources derive additional meaning from how they are created and produced. Texts and other forms of data can be “sources of resistance” in which an objective of the source is to disrupt hegemonic and oppressive belief systems and processes.³⁰ This aspect of the feminist approach to content analysis aligns with this study’s critical engagement with Black queer feminist

²⁹ Jordan-Zachery, 71.
³⁰ Leavy, 230.
works and intervention within the discipline of political science. As detailed in the literature review, the politics of knowledge production within the discipline have served to marginalize and thwart innovative epistemologies and methods in subfields such as Black politics, (mainstream) women and politics, and LGBTQ politics.

The content analysis taken up in this dissertation allowed me to transgress traditional locations from which one derives academic knowledge (i.e. primarily by books and academic articles behind paywalls) by incorporating data from audio and video sources, as Smith and Cohen have not limited the communication of their political thought to the written word. Many of the audio and video sources were produced as a result of radical projects, radical interventions, and radical collectives that understand the politics of generating alternative spaces and methods for the dissemination of counter-hegemonic knowledges (see Appendix A for more information on data sources). Overall, the content analysis facilitated the investigation of subjugated knowledges and alternative ways of knowing the social and political world, thus challenging the reproduction of hegemonic knowledges, methodologies, and methods.

Research Guidelines and Evaluation

Political science has specified general guidelines for qualitative content and document analysis. To ensure trustworthiness in my data analysis I relied upon guidelines that address: 1) triangulation, 2) intense exposure and thick description, 3)

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audit trails and discrepant evidence, and 4) reporting of personal biases. Similar to the research methods concepts of reliability and validity, these guidelines are intended to assist with the evaluation of the research process.

The first guideline denotes the importance of triangulation. Triangulation occurs when researchers confirm their findings with multiple sources of evidence. Triangulation was achieved in this study by using numerous evidentiary data sources such as books, articles, transcript documents, audio content, and video content capturing the political thought of Smith and Cohen over decades. The second guideline, intense exposure and thick description, necessitates that researchers “immerse themselves in their texts and produce detailed accounts of their findings.” This was achieved by a meticulous and iterative coding process and is further exhibited in the next chapter which features this study’s findings. The third guideline emphasizes the use of audit trails and discrepant evidence which encourages researchers to state the research process used in their study so that it is clear how they came to their results and conclusions. The fourth guideline urges researchers to be transparent about how their own subjectivity may factor into their research process. In feminist research, the subjectivity of the researcher is a valuable component in the research process. Feminist researches are thus encouraged to engage in a reflexive process. This reflexive process was addressed in the aforementioned section, “Reflexivity in the Research Process.”

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32 Wesley, 148.
Data Sample

As a study that explored Black queer feminist political thought, data sources were dependent upon the available scholarship produced by Smith and Cohen. Nonetheless, it was still necessary to be selective about, and thus narrow down, the specific data sources to be relied upon for the content analysis. For example, repetitive data sources were excluded from final analysis (e.g. audio and visual materials that conveyed similar information, such as a lecture presented at and archived by multiple universities; articles or chapters reprinted in multiple journals or books). Final selection of the data sources were chosen based on those that most directly addressed the research question and objectives of this study.

- The combined audio and visual media included 11 data sources amounting to approximately 888 minutes (14 hours and 48 minutes).
- The combined textual data included 10 data sources: 3 books, 5 articles, and 2 transcript documents.

Specific information concerning the data sources is located in Appendix A.

Data Collection Procedures

I relied on the constituent elements that comprise a frame of reference, as explained by Barker, Jones, and Tate, to serve as the a priori conceptual codes for my study. This was supplemented by a “miscellaneous” code to keep track of any emergent elements or other relevant observations specific to Black queer feminism. In *African Americans and the American Political System*, Barker, Jones, and Tate explain that a
frame of reference is a “particular approach” used to comprehend socio-political activity. A frame of reference guides one’s focus and observations, and “in that sense it illuminates our understanding, like a lens.” A frame of reference has both descriptive and prescriptive aspects: it is employed to describe the current state of Black politics and to suggest future courses of action that move Black Americans towards justice. Barker, Jones, and Tate identify and describe the multiple elements of a frame of reference as, “a set of general assumptions about the nature of the subject or experience being investigated, what concepts or categories of analysis are most useful for understanding it, what level of analysis should be adopted, and what questions should be answered in order to develop the most useful understanding of that which is being investigated.” After modifying the elements described by Barker, Jones, and Tate and incorporating the research objectives of my study, the constituent elements of a frame of reference that I used for my codes were as follows:

- General assumptions about the nature of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience
- Concepts or categories of analysis most useful for understanding Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience

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34 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 6.

35 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 6.

36 Barker, Jones, and Tate, 5.
• Levels of analysis to be utilized

• Questions to be answered in order to generate the most useful understanding of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience

• Miscellaneous (emergent elements)

These conceptual codes allowed me to both deductively (with a priori codes) and inductively (with emergent codes) categorize Black queer feminist political thought throughout the data collection process and to ultimately discover the constituent elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference.

Collecting data for this study was an iterative process. First, to collect data from audio and visual media I listened to or watched each podcast, audio recording, or video several times before coding in order to familiarize myself with the content of the media source. After creating a coding template instrument (via a Microsoft Word document), I then proceeded to listen to or watch each media source again, this time carefully coding and inscribing the ideas imparted by Smith and Cohen into the a priori categories modified from Barker, Jones, and Tate. Separate coding documents were used for each media source. Next, I reviewed each coding document to examine the data collected, using Microsoft Word’s comment function to record memos about the data. I then listened to or watched each media source again to ensure that data was coded within the appropriate predetermined category, to clarify any questions that may have arisen upon reviewing the coded documents, and to ensure quotations were accurately recorded. These steps were repeated multiple times: review coding documents, listen to or watch audio and visual media for clarity and accuracy, and review coding documents again.
Collecting data from textual sources followed a slightly modified, although similarly iterative process. Each textual data source was read prior to coding in order to familiarize myself with the content of the text. Instead of assigning numbers to codes, as is sometimes done in studies using coding techniques to analyze textual data, I opted to assign a color to the a priori codes. When textual data was found to correspond with the a priori codes it was highlighted using the assigned code color. This made it easier to clearly view where evidence of the code was located within multiple pages of a book or document. After satisfactorily color coding a textual source, the identified textual evidence was moved to a coding instrument (via a Microsoft Word document). Separate coding documents were used for each text source. Next, I reviewed each coding document to examine the data collected, using Microsoft Word’s comment function to record memos about the collected data, and referred back to the text source when needed. These steps were repeated multiple times: review coding documents, refer back to text source for clarity and accuracy, and review coding documents again.

Advantages and Limitations of Content Analysis

Analyzing data by way of a content analysis involves both strengths and limitations. In terms of limitations, researchers may sometimes find it challenging to locate texts, artifacts, and media that are ideal for their investigations. If only a few data sources are available, researchers may discover that the available data sources are not
relevant to the problem under study and/or for their research questions.\textsuperscript{37} Fortunately, this was not an issue for my study as both Smith and Cohen have generated a multitude of content that proved most useful for the purpose of my research. Another general limitation of content analysis is that it necessitates that the phenomenon under study has been recorded.\textsuperscript{38} If the phenomenon of interest to a researcher has not been recorded in some way (i.e. through texts, artifacts, or media), a different research method and data analysis technique would be more useful for an investigation. Again, this limitation did not apply to my study as Black queer feminist political thought has been recorded and communicated through a variety of written and digital mediums.

For the present research, utilizing content analysis revealed more strengths than limitations. The technique was chosen to suit the purpose of this study and was ideal for answering my research questions. Utilizing both text and media data sources provided a strength for this study as relevant information was reemphasized, data was found and presented across different formats and mediums which facilitated a saturation process. This enabled me to better ascertain the main ideas and critical elements of Smith’s and Cohen’s political thought. The content analysis permitted me to carry out my inquiry at the liberty of my own schedule, as I was not dependent on coordinating with numerous participants to collect my data.

Similarly, I was able to repeat or revise my data collection and analysis process as many times as needed as I was not reliant on any restricted opportunities to conduct

\textsuperscript{37} Babbie, 384.

\textsuperscript{38} Babbie, 368.
interviews or focus groups; nor was I limited by an experimental design that may have included beginning the research project anew had I discovered a serious error. The freedom to repeat the processes of research without significant interference to the completion of a study is an advantage that allows researchers using content analysis to remedy errors with minimal consequences.\textsuperscript{39} Researchers who make use of content analysis also generally discover that they do not need any special equipment, they may save time and money, and their research does not involve disrupting the phenomenon of study because it is an unobtrusive mode of inquiry.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Babbie, 368.

\textsuperscript{40} Babbie, 368.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

This chapter reports the key findings of this study in which the content analysis evinced the elements, and thus contours, of a Black queer feminist frame of reference. I relied on multiple feminist methodologies to inform my research process. Feminist methodologies are fundamentally political as research employing these principles has justice and transformation as an underlying objective. The transformational objective of this study is to disrupt the sexist, cisnormative, heteronormative, and white supremacist knowledges that render Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans individuals generally, invisible within the discipline of political science. This dissertation argues that a Black queer feminist frame of reference has the potential to radicalize political science, and the Black politics subfield in particular, by centering the political realities of non-normative Black people.

To explore the potential of this frame, two case studies of Black queer feminist activist scholarship were selected. A qualitative content analysis was utilized to investigate a sample of the activist scholarship of Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen, which generated data that could be coded as representative of the constituent elements that comprise a frame of reference. Ultimately, the findings from this study’s content analysis furnish the elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference for advancing
radical knowledge and accentuating Black queer and trans political realities within the discipline.

The research questions are answered with corresponding quotations from the activist scholarship of Smith and Cohen. These quotations demonstrate and support that the coding process generated meaningful qualitative data that was observed within and across the multiple data sources used for this dissertation project. It should be noted that all supporting evidence that was found during the research process is not reported here, as it was not the intent of this study to merely reproduce the written work and spoken thought of Smith and Cohen. That is to say, much more data was collected and coded than what is presented. Again, this chapter presents key findings that suggest support for this study’s research questions. These findings, derived from the content analysis, assist with the development of a Black queer feminist frame of reference for the discipline.

**Summary of Study’s Qualitative Content Analysis**

Data sources were chosen based on those that most directly addressed the research questions and objectives of this study. A combination of audio and visual media, as well as textual sources pertaining to the activist scholarship of Smith and Cohen were examined. The constituent elements that comprise a frame of reference, as explained by

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Barker, Jones, and Tate,\(^2\) served as the a priori codes for this study. This was supplemented by a “miscellaneous” code to keep track of any emergent elements or other relevant observations specific to Black queer feminism. The codes allowed me to both deductively and inductively categorize Black queer feminist political thought throughout the data collection process and to ultimately ascertain the constituent elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference. Findings are organized around the four constituent elements modified from Barker, Jones, and Tate, followed by findings that demonstrate evidence of an emergent element. By critically engaging with the activist scholarship of these two theorists, I was able to observe the complementary political thought between a Black queer feminist elder (Smith) and a Black queer feminist who follows nearly a generation behind (Cohen). Their combined political thought informs a Black queer feminist frame of reference.

**Research Question**

This dissertation has problematized the absence of Black queer feminism in the discipline of political science. The primary research question that guided this dissertation asked, *how might a Black queer feminist frame of reference explain the nature of Black queer feminist politics and Black queer and trans political experience?* In order to answer this question, it was necessary to determine the elements of a Black queer feminist frame of reference, derived from Smith’s and Cohen’s political thought, which

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are reported in the subsequent sections of this chapter. By doing so, this study entered into a larger debate about the conceptualization of Black queer feminism. By answering the primary research question, I was able to ascertain what this particular frame of reference might entail, and further interpret possible implications of how it can inform the study of Black politics (to be discussed in the next chapter).

*General Assumptions About the Nature of Black Queer Feminist Politics and Black Queer and Trans Political Experience*

The content analysis on Smith’s and Cohen’s work revealed that the two activist-scholars embrace unmistakably leftist politics, foregrounding racial oppression and economic exploitation alongside processes of gender and sexual normalization and oppression. When conceptualizing their political thought as Black queer feminism, insights into the assumptions of this frame of reference were made clear (see Appendix B for a concise list of these assumptions which can be used as guidelines when employing a Black queer feminist analysis). For instance, the findings indicated that Black queer feminism accentuates relationships to normative power. Cohen has defined this normativity as follows: “normative meaning the structured nature of power that comes from traditional institutions like the state and the government…[the] economic system and capitalism…[and] from practices of identity that are thought to be normal.” ³

Because Black queer and trans individuals, and Black queer womxn in particular, are

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positioned outside of normative power and identities, a specific standpoint arises. Smith has recalled that during the 1970s, “some of us who were doing some of the most groundbreaking work and asking some of the most cheeky, unsettling questions—we were lesbians. So of course we had a different perspective on the world. We knew that we were not necessarily welcome in any context.”

Throughout Smith’s work, it was found that emphasis is placed on the critical role that queer womxn of color play in feminist movements. Smith has linked the oppression and activism of queer womxn of color in the US to queer womxn of color across the globe, remarking that the political leadership of lesbians of color has supported the gains in autonomy for womxn of color at large. She has stated that “Progressive Third World Lesbians have been at the forefront of all the political organizing and writing which has helped provide the context for all women of color to express themselves both artistically and politically.” For Smith, it is fundamentally assumed that sexism and heterosexism are interconnected and thus require anti-oppression strategies that seek to abolish both in tandem. The reality is, according to Smith, sexism and heterosexist injustice cannot be delinked or opposed in singularity. Smith has asserted that “homophobia is a logical extension of sexual oppression because sexual oppression is about roles - one gender

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5 Smith, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 146.
does this, the other does that. One’s on top, the other is on the bottom. You can’t eradicate one without the other.”

Data about a Black queer feminist frame of reference, derived from the political thought of Smith and Cohen, indicated the assumption that politics and analyses are (and should be) organized around the most marginal within Black communities and the larger body politic. As specified by Cohen, this means that analyses should foreground “those who stand on the (out)side of state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality,” those with the least influence over the hegemonic apparatuses that dominate their lives. Cohen has further theorized beyond the current sociopolitical organization in order to address unjust distributions of power, access, and resources. Her political thought and praxis has rejected assimilationist strategies that seek to move those on the margins into “dominant institutions and normative social relationships,” arguing alternatively for radical and transformational politics that strive to shift the “values, definitions, and laws [that] make these institutions and relationships oppressive.” Smith too has been critical of the “assimilationist ‘civil rights’ agenda” that is so often made the objective of mainstream feminist and LGBTQ political efforts.

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9 Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 180.
The work of both Smith and Cohen imparts a clear radial assumption that the elimination of systemic oppression necessitates systemic transformation. Smith’s intersectional thinking informed how she arrived at this conclusion. Smith stated: “I worked from the assumption that all of the ‘isms’ were connected. It was simply not possible for any oppressed people, including lesbians and gay men, to achieve freedom under this system.”

The political thought of Smith and Cohen displayed a unified vision that is captured by the concept of Black queer feminism. Cohen has explicitly located a liberatory politics within the concept as is exemplified in her declaration that the “combination of Black feminism and a commitment to queer as a continuation of the Black radical tradition may be our best hope for the radical movements and queer futures we all deserve.”

To be sure, the content analysis did expose differences between the two activist-scholars as well. Notably, there are differences in geopolitical scope regarding Smith and Cohen’s political thought and focus. Smith’s political thought takes an international scope as given. She has been unequivocal about the fact that “the organizing of women of color in the USA is of course linked to Third World women’s organizing globally.” Cohen has acknowledged that her focus has tended to foreground the domestic realm, yet she has nevertheless stressed the importance of working with a global analysis:

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12 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 146.
“One of the things I would hope for, you know, as you grow and get older, is an opportunity to have more of those transnational/international conversations to learn more both about the exception and the rule in terms of the ways in which people are structuring their politics and their political struggles; and to think creatively outside of...American capitalism about...things we might ask for, ways to mobilize people, even ways to engage in...educational campaigns. [The international connection has] been missing [in my political work] and I’m hoping that it will appear in the future.”

Concepts or Categories of Analysis Most Useful for Understanding Black Queer Feminist Politics, and Black Queer and Trans Political Experience

The findings in this section demonstrate how Smith and Cohen have complicated and theorized concepts beyond their mundane usage. Interestingly, Smith’s more recent work has taken on the task of clarifying an older concept that originally conveyed a radical idea for political action and organizing. Yet in more recent times this concept has been deployed in a manner that mitigates its original and inherent political meaning.

Identity politics, which has pejorative connotations in its mainstream usage today, was conceived initially to capture the idea of a politics that stems from one’s own positionality, agency, and intent to transform the current political reality.

Identity politics was first articulated in the The Combahee River Collective Statement, written in 1977, published in 1979, and co-authored by Smith, her twin sister Beverly Smith, and their comrade Demita Frazier. The statement remains a foundational example of radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, Black queer feminist socialist thought. When reflecting on the Statement, Smith has maintained that the misuse of the concept

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identity politics today is not at all how the Collective imagined it: “We were asserting that we exist, our concerns and our experiences matter. We named that ‘identity politics,’ because we said that it is legitimate to look at the elements of one’s own identity and to form a political analysis and practice out of it.” Smith stated further that “to say that Black women, many of whom were lesbians, and were either working class or identified with their working-class roots, to say that people who had those multiple identities actually had a right to create a political agenda that was relevant to addressing the oppressions that they faced, that was groundbreaking!”

Examining the work of Smith and Cohen necessarily led me to their comrades in Black queer feminist struggle. Indeed, Black queer feminism, and Black feminisms in general, are always in dialogue and action with others. When speaking with Smith and others about the legacy of Combahee and the misguided deployment of identity politics, Smith’s comrade Demita Frazier stated,

We know language evolves but the way language is being manipulated and toyed with right now we know what’s up. So, I’m very curious as to how we’re going to continue this Black feminist project going forward...we’re at a state of development right now where there’s a lot of manipulation with a negative intent. Words like ‘identity politics’...the ways in which powerful concepts, deeply powerful concepts, are being manipulated and sold back to us, we haven’t quite figured out how to seize the narrative, how to create an energy for it to be impossible for it to be mis-defined.16

14 Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 54.

15 Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 43.

Generating, re-claiming, re-defining, and adding depth to concepts that have been taken for granted is part of the struggle for scholars and activists who understand language as a social and political tool that can be used for critical consciousness raising and liberatory futures. For social and political theorists in particular, the ability to accurately define an oppressive phenomenon so that individuals are better equipped to address and overcome it is paramount. Cohen was found to take seriously the nuances found within the concept of marginalization, for instance, with the aim of making intelligible how marginalization as a varied process works to suppress and oppress individuals and groups. Cohen has described marginalization generally as “the exclusion, often categorical exclusion, of groups from dominant resources, dominant institutions, participation and control over dominant institutions, that really affect and define the quality of one’s life.”

Yet Cohen has equally made clear that different strategies of marginalization are deployed based on the resistance that develops as a consequence of marginalization. That is, “processes of marginalization are not static, but dialectical, in their relationship with strategies and actions of resistance on the part of marginal group members.” More specific and alternative strategies of marginalization include integrative marginalization where

instead of the all-encompassing control over the quality of life and life choices of marginal group members exerted by categorical marginalization, integrative strategies provide control by unequivocally regulating the majority of marginal community members while allowing a chosen few to have limited access to dominant institutions and resources.

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17 Cohen, “The Boundaries of Blackness.”


19 Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 58; emphasis original.
Cohen has also explained the additional process of *advanced marginalization*

where some Black people have been provided mobility and access to dominant institutions and resources [and become] invested in a process of assimilation and respectability. They don’t want white people, or other folks, to think that Black people don’t operate with the same norms and values that is expected in society. They want to distance themselves from those issues that suggest that somehow we’re living outside of those norms and values.  

Alternatively, Cohen’s concept of *secondary marginalization* denotes an intra-group process that has shed light on the fact that “even within marginalized communities, sadly, there is another process of marginalization that we have to be paying attention to, that too often replicates what we’ve seen from dominant society.”  

Secondary marginalization is the concept that Cohen has used to explain and describe the exclusion and mistreatment of non-heteronormative Black womxn and Black queer and trans individuals within Black communities. “Secondary processes of marginalization can be exercised by the more privileged members of marginal groups, as the ‘management’ of marginal group members is negotiated daily by those they would call their own,” Cohen has said.  

Two further concepts and categories of analysis found within the activist scholarship of Cohen are gender and sexuality, particularly how these concepts and categories impact race and class and hold within them radical potentialities. Cohen’s thinking transcends the dominant gender binary and analyzes the far-reaching impact and implications of heteronormative gender. The lens of Black queer feminism aids her

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20 Cohen, “The Boundaries of Blackness.”

21 Cohen, “The Boundaries of Blackness.”

22 Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 70.
nuanced understanding. As Cohen has explained, “through a Black queer feminist approach we know that gender as it intersects with other structures…is a site of constructed radical possibility.”\(^{23}\) This radical possibility is actualized when the intent to transgress and struggle against injustice is undertaken. In fact, intentionality was found to be an orienting idea underlying Black queer feminist politics. Cohen has suggested further that “Black queer feminism is an intentional radical politics, pushing back against dominant and community-based identities and institutions that prescribe and reify hetero-gendered, or normalized understandings of family, of sex, of desire, or joy, and the presentation of self, including gender.”\(^{24}\) However, she doesn’t “assume that gender categories (woman, man, trans, gender non-conforming) in and of themselves are radical. Instead it is the transformative politics and potential of those categories, that’s where in fact the radical potential of the future of gender is to be found.”\(^{25}\)

With regard to the interaction between gender and sexuality, Cohen’s broad assertion regarding the concept queer has led her to argue for queer as a verb; that is, the queering of politics and analyses. This idea of queering informs much of Cohen’s political thought. To queer gender is to emphasize that even within gender categories there is nuance, fluidity, and various connections to power. Cohen has remarked that “the possibilities that come from a Black queer feminist analysis” are in the recognition that


\(^{24}\) Cohen, “Future of Gender.”

\(^{25}\) Cohen, “Future of Gender.”
“queer, at its best, can move us away from the simple binaries of difference, binaries of man/woman, straight/gay, I dare say even cis/trans which sometimes can flatten the complexity of our relationship to power and our relationship to each other.”

Moreover, Cohen’s conceptualization of queer includes an understanding of how the state queers individuals, regardless of how they personally identify their gender and sexuality. This results in a queer subjecthood. Cohen has elucidated queer subjects as those who are “the targets of racial normalizing projects intent on pathologizing them across the dimensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, simultaneously making them into deviants while normalizing their degradation and marginalization until it becomes what we expect—the norm—until it becomes something that we no longer pay attention to.”

By opening up to the idea of an active queer, rather than limiting queer to a static personal identity, radical reinterpretations can occur. When an analysis is queered, for instance, concepts like deviance become filled with possibility. For Cohen, what has been pejoratively labeled as deviant behavior may in fact hold tremendous potential for resistance. When deviance is combined with the intent to challenge unjust power distributions it is “transformed into politicized resistance.”

*Levels of Analysis*

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26 Cohen, “Future of Gender.”


Smith’s and Cohen’s work has pointed to both macro (structural and institutional) and micro (individual) levels of analysis, as well as to a meso (community or group) level of analysis. Through their work I observed that while a Black queer feminist frame appreciates analyses at the meso and micro levels, it is continuously connected to a systemic analysis of the larger sociopolitical reality. As mentioned above, Smith’s political thought brings a radical global and anti-imperialist analysis to Black queer feminist politics. Smith has declared that,

the U.S. military’s real function [is] acting as the world’s police force, implementing this country’s imperialist foreign policy, and murdering those who stand in its way…we need a politics complex enough and principled enough to talk about nondiscrimination at the same time that it provides a critique for why a military and weapons arsenal of the type that the U.S. government maintains negates any possibility of justice and world peace.  

Furthermore, Smith views an analysis of capitalism as central to Black queer feminist politics. Smith has been adamant that

all the aspects of who I am are crucial, indivisible, and pose no inherent conflict. They only seem to be in opposition in this particular time and place, living under U.S. capitalism, a system whose functioning has always required that large groups of people be economically, racially, and sexually oppressed and that these potentially dissident groups be kept divided from each other at all costs.

Cohen’s political thought, too, evinced that unjust power at the macro level originates in the sociopolitical structure in which harms such as “exploitation and violence [are] rooted in state-regulated institutions and economic systems.”


complicates ideas concerning the structures governing individuals and groups within Black communities. In addition to the oppressive systems of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and heteropatriarchy, there is also the struggle against institutionalized heteronormativity which attempts to regulate and constrain nonnormative conceptions and expressions of gender and sexuality. Cohen theorizes that heteronormativity “privilege[s] heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society,”32 while also enforcing a strict cisnormative gender binary. Heteronormativity operates by way of sociopolitical normalizing processes, the precepts of conservative heterosexist moral beliefs, and is sanctioned by the heteropatriarchal state. Similarly, Smith has pointed out that “racism, segregation and white supremacy…shape African American lesbian and gay people existences.”33

At the meso or community and group level, Cohen has theorized that within both Black and LGBTQ communities, and of course, Black LGBTQ communities, there are multiple stratifications and relationships to power. Cohen has observed that “often situated among those subpopulations of marginal communities are [the] most vulnerable economically, socially, and politically, and [those] whose vulnerable status is linked to narratives that emphasize the ‘questionable’ moral standing of the subpopulation.”34 Cohen has stated further that,

I think that it’s important for any movement concerned with the liberation in particular of black people to be thinking about those individuals who are most


33 Smith, The Truth That Never Hurts, 85.

marginalized nationally and in our own communities. And those are often poor people, trans and cis women, as well as LGB folks. So while we have made some progress in having activists and scholars detail the role that racism, sexism, and class play in structuring and truncating the lives of all black people, we still have much work to do to explain and challenge how heterosexism and heteronormativity work to limit the lives of black people.  

Intra-community power distributions impact how and if community members can access key resources and relationships within and outside of one’s various groups. As Cohen has explained, “the political issues that continue most often to be pursued and embraced publicly by community institutions and leaders are those thought to be linked to, or to conform to, middle-class/dominant constructions of moral, normative, patriarchal citizenship.” Cohen has thus urged us to think with greater depth, beyond how circumstances can be improved for marginalized individuals with access to relative normative power, as multiple struggles for identity take place within underserved groups. Smith has also spoken to meso level politics by reminding us that “Black lesbians and gay men are linked by our shared racial identity and political status in ways that white lesbians and gays are not. These links between us are sociological, cultural, historical, and emotional and I think it is crucial to explore this new terrain together.” Therefore,

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37 Smith, The Truth That Never Hurts, 84.
as Smith has asserted, “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender liberation still belong on any Black feminist agenda.”

When examining politics at the individual level with a Black queer feminist frame of reference, the data suggested that it is helpful to return to Cohen’s articulation of deviance. Micro choices can engender both meso and macro effects such that “it is possible that through deviant choices individuals open up a space where public defiance of the norms is seen as a possibility and an oppositional worldview develops.” Smith, too, has emphasized the critical work that an individual level analysis can do to make marginalized experiences more visible. Smith comments that “work which incorporates autobiographical elements is a tradition of all oppressed writers, because our stories are continually ignored and dismissed.”

Questions to Be Answered in Order to Generate the Most Useful Understanding of Black Queer Feminist Politics, and Black Queer and Trans Political Experience

Black queer feminism generates critical empirical and theoretical questions. These questions help direct Black queer feminist politics and political inquiry, as well as illuminate queer and trans experiences. Cohen is interested in transforming our current conditions, not merely reforming them or only privileging certain individuals in our solutions. This provokes inquiries that encourage scholars to study where power is

38 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 86.


40 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 145.
located in Black communities, how resources are distributed, and why some are able to access relative power over others. Questions raised by Cohen include: “who has access to power in marginalized communities?”, “how is power distributed throughout marginalized communities?”, “who also is excluded, even internally?”; and “what does it mean to be a Black gay, lesbian, trans…bisexual person, and what is our relationship to and standing in Black communities?” Returning to the concept of gender, Cohen has further motivated contemplation on how to move toward visionary futures and what those futures might look like and entail. She has remarked that

through a Black queer feminist approach I think we’re compelled to create spaces where we can have hard and liberatory discussions based on love and respect…in those spaces we can ask questions about the future of gender that include ‘is our goal to abolish gender?’[or] ‘are we seeking to democratize gender?’…‘can we imagine a time when gender empowers instead of limits?’ or when it’s not tied to a system of oppression and if it exists at all that maybe in fact it generate joy and help us thrive. And ‘what does the end of gender oppression look like and entail for those in particular on the margins of the margins?’ That’s where we find liberation. That’s where we find freedom.43

Smith too has interrogated the politics located within the Black community. In fact, she has encouraged historical study to uncover the social and political experiences of Black queer individuals and groups. Smith has asked, “how did Black lesbians and gays view their own existences within Black communities during various historical eras?”

41 Cohen, The Boundaries of Blackness.
42 Cohen, “The Boundaries of Blackness.”
43 Cohen, “Future of Gender.”
44 Smith, The Truth That Never Hurts, 84.
Further, Smith highlighted distinct contributions and historical periods that need to be re-interrogated by scholars and researchers to take account of marginalized realities:

What does it mean that the major outpouring of Black literature, art, and cultural consciousness in this century prior to the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies was significantly shaped by Blacks who were not heterosexuals? How would those who celebrate this period for its major intellectual and artistic achievements view it if they fully realized how much it was a queer production?  

Smith additionally stated that she “hope[s] that other researchers will focus with much more clarity on the specific histories of Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans[gender] people.”

More broadly, Cohen has prompted inquiry that assess the state of feminist politics and how these politics can be deployed for transformational objectives. Cohen has stated:

feminism should also require us to think broadly and radically about what we are fighting for—the outcomes we seek to the oppression that we face. Radical black feminists, in particular, have argued that while immediate policy changes can be part of what we fight for, the structural transformation of the lived condition of marginal communities has to guide our struggle.

Smith has additionally encouraged us to consider how we can bring together people across differences: “how do we organize across differences? How do we not erase each others’ identities? How do we not be defensive when people raise issues that are not necessarily directly our own? How do we create a real women’s movement that is inclusive and for everybody?”

47 Cohen and Jackson, 777.
48 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 43-44.
Emergent Element

An important aspect of Black queer feminist politics was found to be the ideas of collectivity and coalition politics (over individualism and siloed movements). The power of radical coalition was a recurrent element in both Smith’s and Cohen’s political thought, particularly in their discussions and theorizing on social and political movements. The coalition politics emphasized in their work brings the significance of multi-issues politics to the fore. Coalitions can be used as strategies against the individualism promoted by dominant worldviews and systems that seek to separate individuals and groups from one another, weakening opportunities for oppositional political action. In addition, collectivity and coalition politics serve as strategies to bring about immediate gains, as well as incite the systemic transformation that was found to be critical in both Smith’s and Cohen’s future visions.

For Cohen, coalition politics and queer politics are linked. Cohen has contended that one need not claim queer as a personal identity to practice Black queer feminist politics. Many non-queer self-identified people are nevertheless queered by racial capitalism and the state. Cohen has stated:

To me, a Black queer feminist lens is about centering an analysis of power and thinking about political solidarity and how in fact we structure and imagine our movements. It’s not about ‘I am queer.’ And that’s I guess fine. It worries me a bit because I feel like it becomes hard for people to make the distinction between the verb of ‘queering’, the practice of …looking at the world through a…queer feminist lens, and the…performance and sexual identity of queer. 49

Thus, “the radical potential of queer politics,” Cohen has said, is in its ability to unite those on the outside of hegemonic state and capitalist power, those who share a common material reality in that “numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate and police” their lives.\(^{50}\) It is this shared, though nuanced and multifaceted, plight that can generate the “radical coalition” and collective resistance to bring about a more just world.\(^{51}\)

Smith’s political thought also demonstrated that she is against the isolation of political struggles. Returning to the concept of identity politics, Smith has asserted that its calculated misuse today reinforces individualism and separation. Smith has stated that, “the narrow, watered-down dilution of the most expansive meaning of the term ‘identity politics’ [is] used by people as a way of isolating themselves, and not working in coalition, and not being concerned about overarching systems of institutionalized oppression.”\(^{52}\) Smith has stressed that the concept of identity politics was and remains critical for collective organizing:

> We were asserting our validity and our right to exist, to examine our political situation, and to organize to change that situation. We never were asserting that no one else’s political status, social status, economic status, or oppression was important. We never thought that. We actually believed that the way you come together is to recognize everyone fully for who they are, respect and understand who they are, as we work toward common goals of justice and liberation and freedom.\(^ {53}\)

\(^{50}\) Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 441.

\(^{51}\) Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 452.

\(^{52}\) Smith, \textit{Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around}, 54.

\(^{53}\) Smith, \textit{Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around}, 55.
According to Smith, it is by working and dialoguing together that our political goals have a higher chance of becoming actualized:

I think consciousness, though, comes into being through collective dialogue. It’s probably not possible to be fully conscious if the only person who you ever ran your ideas by was yourself. That gets into political organizing and movements. It’s not enough just to have the markers of identity that would say logically, this person would be really very sharp about what’s going on in relationship to power and oppression—stereotyping, prejudice, bigotry, violence, terrorism, et cetera. For example, Clarence Thomas and Condoleezza Rice are both smart but lack this type of political consciousness… I really feel that consciousness is about self-examination and analysis, collective dialogue to really try to figure out what in the world is going on. “Why is it this way? What can we do about it?”

This chapter has addressed this study’s major research question. This was achieved by reporting the findings of this study’s content analysis. By answering the primary research question, I was able to ascertain the particular elements of this frame of reference, which were derived from exploring Smith’s and Cohen’s political thought. In the next chapter, I generate a critical discussion that illuminates how one can begin to think about using a Black queer feminist frame of reference. Specifically, I discuss the implications of this frame and apply Black queer feminist insights to the discipline of political science, the politics of knowledge production, and present Black queer feminist political projects and activism that illustrate the importance of the study of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics.

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54 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 59
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I develop a critical discussion by interpreting the implications of a Black queer feminist frame reference for political science. I consider how a Black queer feminist frame of reference can be applied to the discipline and specifically inform the study of Black politics (more precisely, Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics) in the discipline. I additionally reflect on and present the transformational Black queer feminist work of Barbra Smith and Cathy J. Cohen that has had reverberations both within and beyond the academy.

Frames of reference are important tools because they provide meaning and understanding for social and political experiences. A particular frame of reference can illuminate realities that are marginalized and made invisible by other, more exclusive, frames. In this way, frames of reference can be interpreted as political as they have the power to direct attention and resources to, or away from, individuals and groups as well as impact knowledge about reality. They can become one’s worldview from which one’s behavior and actions, or research subject choices, are derived. Dominant frames of reference, or worldviews, impart knowledge and information about dominant groups that both establish and maintain their power and privilege. Black political scientist Mack H. Jones has stressed the relationship between hegemonic worldviews, power, and
knowledge. Jones remarks that

[The worldview of a people conditions the nature and content of its social science knowledge and that two peoples’ or cultures’ social sciences will differ to the extent that they have different worldviews. However, when there is an adversarial relationship between two peoples who share a common territory, as is the case with white and black Americans, the worldview of the dominant group will be used to give meaning to social reality and to generate social science knowledge. Knowledge so generated conveys only a caricature of the oppressed or dominated people and hence has little prescriptive utility for their struggle to end their domination.]

This theory can be extrapolated to the adversarial relationships between and among genders, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic classes. This chapter, then, contributes to an ongoing discourse on the politics of knowledge accentuating the role Black queer feminism.

The purpose of discussing the politics of knowledge is to demonstrate how a Black queer feminist frame of reference can be deployed and applied to disrupt and challenge unjust bodies of knowledge. In this instance, Black queer feminism is relied upon to assess the discipline, specifically to analyze how and why research and theorizing on the political realities of Black queer and trans individuals remains limited in political science. The discussion developed in this chapter continues the observations from this dissertation’s literature review in which it was noted that the production of scholarship on the political experiences of marginalized groups remains a political endeavor. Who has the power to say what a “legitimate” political science research topic is, what counts as

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knowledge within the discipline, and what epistemic frameworks and methods are acceptable are all issues that fall under the banner of the politics of knowledge (production). What is and is not given meaningful attention by scholars has political consequences. Yet marginalized scholars seeking to produce alternative knowledge remain located in an institutional context that does not support liberatory ends. Smith herself has called attention to the challenges of generating emancipatory knowledge on Black queer life, remarking that “it has always been obvious…that the difficult, often hostile working conditions that Black academics face as a result of racism in white institutions would make their involvement in explicitly lesbian and gay research an ever-higher risk activity than it is for European American scholars.”

This high risk activity of producing knowledge about one’s own communities has resulted in the suppression of scholarship on certain individuals and groups. However, to conclude this chapter, I also explore the suppression that occurs intra-racially by applying Cohen’s conceptualization of marginalization to further discuss the marginalization processes that occur among Black scholars themselves and perpetuates knowledge hierarchies within the discipline.

**Contributions of Black Queer Feminism**

Within the discipline of political science, Black politics, (mainstream) women and politics, and LGBTQ politics scholars have been successful at challenging the white supremacist, masculinist, and heteronormative assumptions that have underpinned the

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discipline since its inception. Yet each of these subfields present their own limitations which has resulted in difficulties for scholars who seek to study and produce knowledge on the social and political lives of Black queer and trans individuals and groups. The Black politics subfield, for instance, has its own Black cisnormative and heteronormative masculine bias, while the (mainstream) women and politics, and LGBTQ politics subfields lack serious attention to race. Even Black feminist political science scholarship has rarely interrogated the cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions about Black womxnhood and taken account of differences within gender categories and sexual identities that result in different social and political experiences. The existing literature, which houses the knowledge of the discipline, either renders Black queer womxn invisible, or only incorporates nominal inclusion of Black queer womxn such that a substantive understanding of these particular political realities cannot be illuminated. The fact that Black queer womxn, and even non-normative heterosexual womxn, also encounter oppression because of their sexuality and/or nonconformity to normative ideals of womxnhood, including normative ideas about respectable Black womxnhood, is seldom recognized.

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Despite the overall lack of attention to the salience of race in the LGBTQ politics subfield, there has nonetheless been an emphasis on the importance of bringing together both feminist and queer analyses. 7 Black queer and trans feminists, both within and outside of academe, have long discussed the bridging of such analyses, which is today conceived of in Black queer and trans feminisms. This dissertation has explored what a Black queer feminist frame of reference can illuminate for political scientists who wish to generate alternative knowledge and make Black queer and trans lives visible within the discipline. The findings of this study, based on data derived from the examination of Black queer feminist political thought, suggest that a Black queer feminist frame of reference not only incorporates sexuality as a category of analysis, but also broadens and theorizes further the concepts of gender and sexuality, specifically gender nuances found within Black womxnhood.

Deploying a Black queer feminist frame of reference in the discipline is one way to bring subject matter that concerns multiply marginalized groups into the realm of “serious” academic scholarship. In other words, this frame helps to make particular realities legible and facilitates the use of academic resources to support the advancement of marginalized communities. If Black queer and trans people are not visible in political science, for instance, then political scientists cannot understand and explain these specific political realities or assert policy prescriptions that may mitigate immediate harms and help move towards long-term objectives. Political scientists may continue to overlook

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innovative political strategies, collective behavior, and other political phenomena because it does not fit into the established or acceptable frames of reference that dictate what subject matter, individuals, and groups are relevant and important. A Black queer feminist frame of reference provides scholars with an additional tool to ask deeper questions about Black political phenomena and Black power (or lack thereof).

Knowledge is a political resource, and the power to validate or invalidate knowledge has been historically abused to render underserved communities as objects of study, erasing their agency and community-based knowledges. Knowledge, in the form of research and theory, also informs policies that can help or harm these same communities. This underscores how oppression can be reproduced through frames of reference and hegemonic epistemologies. Indeed, critical social theorist and Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins has analyzed how Black womxn’s wisdom has been suppressed, thus making Black feminist thought a subjugated knowledge. “Because elite White men control Western structure of knowledge validation,” Collins explains, “their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, U.S. Black women’s experiences as well as those of women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge.”

Because knowledge is produced along racial, gender, and sexual identity hierarchies (as well as nation and language hierarchies), knowledge thus replicates power

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and privilege for some groups, while the lack of knowledge about and within certain groups creates vulnerabilities. For Black womxn, this erasure and denial of epistemic agency is a form of violence. Critical feminist scholar Grace Kyungwon Hong argues that “it is in black feminist thought that we find the method for reconstituting knowledge production within the university.”9 Therefore, producing and deploying specific paradigms that generate liberatory knowledge, such as Black queer feminism, is one way to fight back against this epistemic oppression.

Like other frames of reference in Black political science, Black queer feminism operates from the Black science perspective that is critical of the systems of oppression that maintain the hegemony of the U.S. regime and the dominance of particular groups.10 A Black queer feminist frame of reference lends scholars another paradigm from which the radical Black political science activist-scholar mandate can be fulfilled. Black politics scholars such as Jones and Black feminist Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd have long argued that dissident scholarship should define Black political science.11 The findings of this dissertation support that the deployment of Black queer feminism in the discipline will continue to disrupt the dominant frameworks and mainstream knowledge production.

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within the discipline. The contributions of a Black queer feminist frame of reference to the discipline are straightforward. Black queer feminism adds depth and nuance to our understanding of political categories such as gender, sexuality, race, and class. It broadens where we locate power struggles, inspiring counter-hegemonic knowledge that challenges the rigidity of what and who counts as “legitimate” subjects for political science inquiries.

This can be observed in Smith’s call to radically (re)interrogate Black political history such that the contributions of Black queer and trans individuals can be analyzed and appreciated,\(^\text{12}\) as well as in Cohen’s emphasis that those on the “margins of the margins”\(^\text{13}\) should be the focal points of political analyses and struggles. The periphery of the margins not only points to the political experiences of Black queer and trans individuals, but equally includes those individuals who are otherwise queered by the state. Nonnormative cisgender heterosexual Black womxn, for example, whose familial and parenting formations are at odds with the norms and values laid down by the white supremacist-capitalist-heteropatriarchal regime, and whose economic vulnerability makes them susceptible to regulation by the surveillance state through “welfare offices, courts, jails, prisons, child protective services and public housing authorities”\(^\text{14}\) surely do not experience the autonomy of, nor resource equity with, middle-and-upper-class (white) people.

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\(^{12}\) Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 86.


LGBTQ individuals. A Black queer feminist analysis appreciates this critical difference of power.

By queering Black feminism for the study of Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics, it becomes more apparent that Black womxnhood is not static, but rather a multidimensional experience with differing interpretations, yet similar vulnerabilities that necessitate solidarity, collectivity, and coalition for total liberation. It cannot yet be assumed that Black queer and trans womxn, or nonnormative Black womxn at large, are already included in Black feminist scholarship. As Black trans political scientist Heath Fogg Davis indicates, “substantive theoretical inquiry requires specificity.”\(^\text{15}\) Black queer feminism offers an alternative approach to studying not only Black politics, but also yields implications for what are arguably the more mainstream political science subfields of women and politics, and LGBTQ politics, thereby integrating literatures that may be understood as discursively distinct. Overcoming the sub-disciplinary disjunctions that render invisible Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans people generally, in political science is a problem that Black queer feminism is equipped to address. Indeed, this frame adds further dimensionality to intersectional analyses within and outside of the discipline.

Smith and Cohen have made “interdisciplinary trouble,” to use Alexander-Floyd’s concept,\(^\text{16}\) across the fields of political science, Black queer studies, Black Women’s

\(^{15}\) Davis, 60.

Studies, Black studies, and women, gender and sexuality studies. Their work is unmistakably leftist, foregrounding racial oppression and economic exploitation alongside processes of gender and sexual normalization. By exploring the possibilities of a Black queer feminist frame of reference through the works of Smith and Cohen, I ascertained quickly that at the core of this frame is an analysis of power, making it an essential critical tool for generating scholarship within political science. When using Black queer feminism to frame studies on Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics, multiple levels of analysis can be employed. This multilevel approach to analyzing Black politics found within a Black queer feminist frame of reference lends scholars another foundation that enables alternative knowledge about the scope, possibility, and relevance of political science.

Although other scholars also view gender categories and identities as political, when discussing Black womxn, scholars most often conceptualize gender as a binary comparative category of analysis against presumably cisgender normative Black “men” or white “women.” A Black queer feminist frame of reference rejects these normative interpretations, yet is aware that the oversimplification of gender in society is not merely the result of individual lack of imagination, but rather stems from efforts of white supremacist state power and dominant institutions to oppress our collective imaginations and agency.17 While Smith and Cohen illuminate the importance of incorporating

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sexuality as a site of oppression, their political thought avoids essentializing Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans individuals generally. Cohen has clarified that positionality is not the same as consciousness or liberation. People can be positioned outside of power, but it doesn’t mean they’re willing to act from that position toward liberation and to have a consciousness that’s about liberation. And to me that’s the work of Black queer feminist politics. It is understanding folk’s positionality but moving them towards liberation or creating an infrastructure in which they move toward liberation.¹⁸

Likewise, Smith has stated that “being in structural oppression to the status quo because of one’s identity, however, is quite different from being consciously and actively oppressed to the status quo because one is a radical and understands how the system works.”¹⁹ Black queer feminism moves the inclusion of sexuality and heteronormativity as a system of oppression squarely within Black feminist political science, such that these concepts become central to Black feminist analyses as opposed to superficially mentioned for checkbox inclusion.

In the next section, I discuss how Black queer feminist thought and politics has democratized where we can locate knowledge, political behavior, and collective struggle by specifically centering the models and methods that Smith and Cohen have used to disrupt and challenge the politics of publishing. By beginning from a Black queer feminist frame of reference, I am able to highlight overlooked, though nevertheless crucial, Black political activity.


Black Queer Feminist Models and Methods

Historically and presently, Black queer feminist activism and scholarship has generated concrete models and methods for building equitable and dissident spaces for knowledge acquisition and production within and beyond the academy. In this section, I discuss these efforts as Black queer feminist democratizing knowledge projects that have implications for future endeavors concerned with building liberatory spaces and institutions for critical epistemic aims. These efforts, in fact, share likeness to the work of Black political scientists. Recall that early efforts to build a Black political science were grounded in the insurgent objective to generate knowledge that would help to overcome unjust conditions for Black Americans. Moreover, HBCUs, as community institutions, were championed as the spaces holding the potential to cultivate dissident scholars and subversive analyses. Through my exploration of the activist scholarship of Smith and Cohen, I was able to clearly observe how a Black queer feminist approach to politics also has the potential to provide not only the discipline and academia an alternative and insurgent way of knowing, but additionally how Black queer feminism is put into practice to serve the needs of Black communities and communities of color at large.

20 The concept of a democratizing knowledge project is borrowed from the Democratizing Knowledge (DK) Project that was cofounded by transnational feminist activist-scholars Linda E. Carty and Chandra T. Mohanty. It “focuses on producing transformative knowledges and collectivities with the purpose of contributing to the growth of inclusive publics in higher education, in the workforce, and in the larger polity nationally and globally.” See http://democratizingknowledge.syr.edu.

21 Jones, Knowledge, Power, and Black Politics, 32.

Black queer feminist models and methods are explicitly political and evince modes of political behavior that may be missed by dominant frames of reference that primarily locate politics within political institutions or via traditional behavior (such as voting or campaign work). Smith’s and Cohen’s models and methods demonstrate how collective work enables concretes material changes in marginalized communities that circumvent mainstream apparatuses. Like the activist-scholar mandate embodied by early Black political scientists, Smith’s and Cohen’s Black queer feminist intellectual activism and scholarship is avowedly directed at substantive material change. When addressing the relationship between Black politics and the written word, Smith commented that “all of our movements for justice and for liberation have writers’ names associated with them...The word has always been connected to action.” Both activist-scholars have been successful in disrupting hegemonic epistemic frameworks and hegemonic knowledge distribution processes that are, in truth, political processes that distribute power and privilege to some and not others. Neither Smith nor Cohen encourages the false separation between intellectual or academic life and social and political movements. Taken together, Smith’s and Cohen’s work represents multiple models and methods that have facilitated transformational knowledge and more equitable institutional spaces.

Smith’s pioneering work in the late 1970s and throughout the 80s disrupted hegemonic white heteropatriarchal epistemology by helping to establish the interdisciplinary field of Black Women’s Studies, ultimately advancing a space for

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institutional Black feminist knowledge production. Within Black feminist political
science scholarship one can see the influence of Smith’s work, most notably in the effort
to develop and expand Black Women’s Studies within the discipline. 24  Smith has
explained that “Black feminism has probably been most successful in its impact on the
academy, in its opening a space for courses, research, and publications about Black
women. Although Black Women’s Studies continues to be challenged by racism,
misogyny, and general disrespect, scholarship in the field has flourished.” 25 Within the
Black politics subfield in political science, one can observe epistemic objectives that
parallel Smith. For example, Jones conceived of Black political science as a resistance
project to subvert the hegemonic order. 26 Smith too had subversive ends in mind vis-à-
vis Black Women’s Studies. Black Women’s Studies, like Black political science, is an
interdisciplinary knowledge project. Smith’s “efforts, in collaboration with many others,
[was] to create, validate, and institutionalize Black women’s studies. The core belief
behind this work was, and is, that Black women’s lives are important, valuable, and
worthy of careful study and theorizing.” 27

24 Evelyn M. Simien, Black Feminist Voices in Politics (Albany, NY: State University of New


26 Maurice Woodard, “Introduction,” in Blacks and Political Science, ed. Maurice Woodard
Andra Orey, and Brown-Dean, “Professional Conferences and the Challenges of Studying Black Politics,”

27 Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 97.
Furthermore, Smith co-founded the first independent womxn of color press in North America, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (1980), with Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Myrna Bain Mariana Roma-Carmona, Rosario Morales, Ana Oliveira, Alma Gómez, Helena Byard, Susan Yung, Rosie Alvarez, and Leota Lone Dog.²⁸ As both a feminist and queer institution, Kitchen Table Press addressed a lacuna for womxn of color writers while increasing access to and distribution of womxn of color knowledges. Smith has recalled that

Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and conditions of our work, and to control the words and images that are produced about us. As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published, except at the mercy or whim of others, whether in the context of alternative or commercial publishing, since both are white-dominated.²⁹

Kitchen Table Press was a direct challenge to suppression of Black womxn’s and other womxn of color knowledges. Smith’s quote directs attention to the power struggle that is involved when attempting to create and distribute emancipatory knowledges when one is adversely positioned. Nonetheless, Smith’s attempts to overcome this position has resulted in political consequences. Her comprehension of knowledge as a political resource led her to take action to make education for liberation more accessible. In Smith’s experience, “books have proven a powerful vehicle for challenging sexism and heterosexism in Third World communities, perhaps because they provide something

²⁸ Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 139.

²⁹ Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 154.
concrete for a reader to relate to and can elicit a potentially thoughtful response as the result of the one-to-one interaction between the reader and the writer’s words.”

Kitchen Table Press remains as a model and a method for critical intervention. Smith and her collaborators were acutely aware that the denial and lack of access to knowledge frustrates marginalized comminutes efforts toward ending oppression. The results of Smith’s work both independently and in collectivity with others has taken place within the context of social and political organizing. Speaking generally about womxn’s efforts and its academic consequences in the latter half of the 20th century, Smith has made clear that “the existence of a feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women’s studies.” Smith has been consistent in her belief that political movements are imperative for social and intellectual change. Her work over the decades has exemplified the direct links between political movements, academia, and the production of liberatory scholarship. In fact, according to Smith, Black feminist movements “grew out of a desire to create political theory and practice that accurately illuminated Black women’s experience and that also provided the tools to challenge the multiple oppressions we faced.” This is not to say that Black feminist knowledge production was, or is, confined within the walls of higher education. Indeed, Smith’s work to establish and maintain Kitchen Table Press was an effort to increase the dissemination of knowledges to a mass, people of color specific, audience.


Kitchen Table Press validated “the difference it makes for women of color to control a
significant means of communication, to have a vehicle for shaping ideology which serves
as a foundation for making practical social and political change.”33

More recently, the activist scholarship of Cohen has been foundational to the
establishment of a digital space that houses the sociopolitical thought of Black
millennials, via the Black Youth Project.34 Through the Black Youth Project, Cohen has
demonstrated how resources supplied by the academy can be redirected to support the
validation and dissemination of community knowledges and information. When Cohen
initially founded the Black Youth Project in 2003 the goal was to investigate “the
opinions and attitudes of young African Americans for the benefit of researchers and
public policy planners.”35 Since this time, the Black Youth Project has introduced and
become a digital online platform, home to a political website that “offers scholars,
educators, community activists, and youth access to the [Black Youth Project’s] research
summaries, as well as a plethora of resources concerning the empowerment and
development of young African Americans.”36

Through the Black Youth Project, a transformative institution and infrastructure
was created that, like the work of Smith, disrupted knowledge and knowledge distribution

33 Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, 155.

34 The website can be found at http://blackyouthproject.com.

35 “The University of Chicago’s Black Youth Project,” The Journal of Blacks in Higher

hierarches. Because the Black Youth Project makes use of digital technologies and an online space, accessibility to young Black writers and thinkers has been increased. Young Black writers and thinkers are able to connect with each other which generates a type of digital collectivity. Writers can inspire and participate in public discourse, analyze the social and political conditions that that they find themselves in, and express themselves freely without the oversight and encroachments of traditional forms of publishing. The website additionally serves as a source for alternative news media thereby offering Black and other marginalized communities another resource that subverts mainstream corporate media and its information bias.

Cohen’s Black Youth Project has material implications in its democratization of knowledge. By generating this accessible and distributional space, knowledge, as a political resource, is made available which facilitates an empowerment process. The Black Youth Project is a present-day illustration of a Black queer feminist undertaking. According to Cohen,

The Black Youth Project is an example of a Black queer feminist project in the sense of “who is it centered around?”, “does it have an analysis of power?” (absolutely), “does it try to shift power so that those folks who are most marginal have an opportunity to speak for themselves?” (yes), ‘can we leverage the resources of an institution or institutions to provide people with resources to do the type of political work that they want to do?” (yes). If we can do all that then to me it’s a Black queer feminist project.37

Cohen’s questions are indicative of the Black queer feminist frame of reference explored in this dissertation and the methods for generating future Black queer feminist projects.

37 Cohen, “Black Queer Feminism.”
She underscores the key assumptions found to be essential to Black queer feminist politics (as reported in the previous chapter): the prioritization of an analysis of power, the centering and leadership of the most marginalized, and deploying action and resources in the service of transformational ends.

As Cohen has pointed out, the infrastructure that facilitates the writing and activism of Black youth is strategically supported by the creative use of formal institutional resources. That is, the Black Youth Project turns around exclusive resources for its own use: liberatory media and connection. Cohen has explained this straightforwardly as “leveraging the privilege and resources that can come with a life in the academy to resist and transform oppressive institutions that too often include the academy.”

Through Cohen’s work I observed how Black queer feminist politics motivates alternative knowledges and innovative political behavior and action.

**Black Queer Feminism and Intersectionality**

Some may wonder what the role of intersectionality is within a Black queer feminist frame of reference and within Black queer feminist politics in general. The short answer is that the idea that Black womxn confront the simultaneity of oppressive sociopolitical forces is an always already articulated notion in the works of Black queer feminists. Recall that the origins of the term intersectionality are found within the writings of Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who originally theorized the

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38 Cohen and Jackson, 780.
concept as an analytical framework to address power, structural discrimination, and structural identity vis-à-vis Black womxn.\textsuperscript{39} While all Black feminist analyses that employ an explicitly intersectional framework do not examine the role of sexuality in structuring Black womxn’s social and political lives, Crenshaw is clear that sexuality is “critical in shaping the experiences of women of color.”\textsuperscript{40} However, the idea that Black womxn encounter multiple overlapping oppressions is consistently present throughout and within Black womxn’s intellectual history.

As Raquel Willis, a Black queer feminist and trans writer and activist, asserts, “all of these ideas around theory and Black queer feminism and intersectionality, while the terms may seem more new the energy around these ideas has always been there.”\textsuperscript{41} Prior to the popularity of this term, Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective had already expressed the need for an “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking”; named heterosexism as a system of oppression alongside racism, classism, and sexism; and incorporated sexuality as a category of analysis into Black feminist theory and vison.\textsuperscript{42} Today, \textit{The Combahee River Collective Statement} (written in 1977, published in 1979, and co-authored by Smith, her


\textsuperscript{41} Raquel Willis, “Black Queer Feminism,” co-hosted by Law for Black Lives and Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), February 5, 2019, video webinar, http://www.law4blacklives.org/webinars/.

\textsuperscript{42} Smith, \textit{Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around}, 45.
twin sister Beverly, and their comrade Demita Frazier) stands as a foundational example of radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, Black queer feminist socialist thought. Smith, in fact, has made clear that she remains a socialist to this day since she “recognize[s] fully the limitations of capitalism…capitalism doesn’t address the bottom line, the root causes of poverty and exploitation.”

The Combahee River Collective was a radical Black queer feminist socialist group whose members identified as lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, thus providing them with a particular standpoint on Black politics and the multidimensionality of Black womxn’s oppression.

In addition to being an antecedent to the concept of intersectionality, Combahee’s, and Smith’s work thereafter, exemplifies what Cohen would later theorize as the radical queer politics that embraces an active and unifying concept of queer, with social and political action aimed at systemic transformation. It is important that discussions and analyses that employ intersectionality are mindful of its theoretical roots and purpose. The radical anti-capitalist politics of Smith and her comrades distinguishes itself from other variants of Black feminism, such as those that remain liberal in their orientation. As described previously, Black feminist political scientist Alexander-Floyd has cautioned Black feminists against liberal feminist frameworks because they fail to “fundamentally advance the cause of social justice.”

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43 Smith, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 57.


states Alexander-Floyd, “activates essentialist understandings of communities that undermine forthright analysis of in-group differences, particularly regarding class.”

Indeed, this remains a limitation of some liberal-esque Black feminist political science scholarship that neglects to account for important intra-gender category differences including differences related to power and social and political experiences.

Similarly, both Smith and Cohen critique the exclusivity that is sometimes found within Black liberal feminist strains in which insufficient attention is given to an analysis of capitalism and the radical commitment to including and fighting for Black queer and trans lives is lacking. Smith and Cohen correspondingly critique the mainstream, white dominated, liberal reformist LGBTQ movements (and hegemonic queer theories) that often betray radical intersectional political commitments. According to Smith, “for the most part queer theory and queer politics…offer neither substantial antiracist analysis nor practice. Queer activists’ understanding of how to deal with race is usually limited to their including a few lesbians and gay men of color in their ranks, who are expected to carry out the political agenda that the white majority has already determined.”

Like Smith, Cohen’s political thought represents radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, Black queer feminism. Indeed, in her arguments for the expansion of the

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47 Barbara Smith, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around; Cohen and Jackson, 775-792.


49 Smith, The Truth That Never Hurts, 128.
concept of queer, she has been unequivocal about the need for a “race-based queer politics,” which for her “demands an intersectional approach.”

Throughout Cohen’s activist scholarship I repeatedly encountered Cohen making precise connections to the Black queer feminist lineage that has been passed down by scholars and activists such as Smith, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Cheryl Clarke. Cohen has stated that Black feminism has been central

in making the position of Black women a political position...understanding the multiple forms of power that structure their positionality or standpoint; how they experience the world and how they think about liberation; the ways in which being a Black woman allows you to see and have an analysis about multiple forms, both what we might consider to be public systems of oppression but also the intimate and domestic, and not suggesting that...the intimate sphere is somehow less important. What I worry about sometimes is we lose sight of the Black feminist history that has informed what I might call a Black queer feminist lens.

The above quote reemphasizes the importance of acknowledging the Black feminist roots in our modern-day conceptions and expansions of Black feminism. As far as debates over the usage of intersectionality are concerned, when exploring a Black queer feminist frame reference, I found that Black womxn’s and Black queer and trans intellectual contributions are brought together in order to generate a political ideal that Cohen has

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52 Cohen, “Cathy Cohen.”
identified as “a broad and inclusive left analysis that can actually engage and mobilize individuals with intersecting identities.”

**Marginalization in Black Political Science**

Before concluding, it is worth considering how a Black queer feminist analysis can be applied to intra-disciplinary processes, including those related to knowledge, access, and power. This section deploys a Black queer feminist frame of reference to derive a specific explanation for the lack of attention to Black queer and trans individuals within Black politics scholarship. While it is true that all scholars that focus on LGBTQ politics face challenges vis-à-vis mainstream political science, often paralleling the objections brought by Black political scientists by objecting to the methodological barriers of behavioralist and rational-choice approaches, it is worth examining if there are particular processes to be found among Black political scientists themselves. These processes may explain the marginalization of individuals and research topics. Collectively, Black political scientists must continue to look inward, not only considering how race and racist knowledge has structured the discipline, but also how power is distributed among (and between) various groups of Black political scientists (and Black scholars generally). Cohen originally conceptualized marginalization with reference to Black politics, specifically the impact of and (lack of) attention to HIV/AIDS in the

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Black community. In a different context, such as when analyzing power within political science, these ideas remain useful. A marginalization process within the discipline and among Black political scientists is one way to explain the epistemic, methodological, and research limitations of Black scholars.

For example, integrative marginalization may explain the favoring of particular Black politics scholars in mainstream political science. As stated by Cohen, integrative marginalization is “a strategy that allows for the limited mobility of some ‘deserving’ marginal group members.” In the discipline this is akin to the privileging of scholarship that resembles the frameworks and methods of Eurocentric heteropatriarchal political science, research that “seems to mirror the increasing specialization of disciplines and distancing between researcher and worldly experience that characterize the academy.” Or, as Jones states, this is the scholarship that exemplifies that “Black political science and political scientists have been mainstreamed.” It is less clear to me if there is the additional process of advanced marginalization, in which those Black politics scholars with greater access to dominant academic institutions and rewards additionally accept and perform within the (neo)liberal professionalized academic culture, serving as managers that keep more radical and non-traditional Black politics

55 Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness.*


scholars(hip) at bay. This may occur through citational choices (which are always political), topic selection, epistemological orientation, and chosen methods. What is more apparent is the occurrence of a type of secondary marginalization in which the inequities of academe, and larger society, are reproduced among Black scholars. This can manifest in the calculated discouragement of research on Black womxn, gender, and sexuality; the exclusion of Black queer and trans scholars from course syllabi; and/or in discrimination against more vulnerable Black political scientists.

The occurrence of practices of marginalization and acts of overt discrimination among Black scholars should not be surprising. The discipline of political science is notoriously conservative, and at times openly sexist and heterosexist. Discipline-wide issues notwithstanding, Black political scientists have a responsibility to create knowledge in service to the liberation of underserved communities, to expose injustice, not embrace it for their own personal gain. As Cohen reminds us, “without increased recognition of the broadening of identities through which people exist in and understand

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the world, traditional black leaders and scholars may end up so out of touch with the differing experiences of multiple segments of black communities that they fill no real function in their communities and thus are left to talk to themselves.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{64} Cohen, \textit{The Boundaries of Blackness}, 347.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored a Black queer feminist frame of reference to advance the study of Black politics (in particular, Black womxn, gender, and sexuality politics) and to make Black queer and trans political experiences more visible within political science. I have argued that Black queer feminism is well suited to advance the radical imperative of Black political science as a Black queer feminist frame of reference is theoretically rich for scholarly contestations of systemic racial oppression, while also incorporating more complex arguments vis-à-vis gender, sexual, and economic oppression and exploitation. A review of literature addressing Black politics, Black feminist politics, and LGBTQ politics within political science has traced the development of the study of diverse political experiences and the resulting knowledge production by and about marginalized groups.

I have emphasized throughout this dissertation that this study is significant due to gaps within the existing scholarship across areas of study within the discipline. These gaps present assumptions of cisnormativity and heteronormativity, thus reinforcing a gender binary in which gender is reduced to “woman/man” or “female/male” identities and differences. This binary is problematic because its perpetual deployment (and enforcement) truncates our understanding of gender complexities, including the nuances
that exist within gender categories, while also erasing the lives of trans and gender nonconforming people.

Additionally, gaps within the existing scholarship reveal the lack of sufficient attention to racial differences when considering queer and trans political experiences. While Black feminist political scientists have moved Black politics scholarship forward in some fundamental ways, especially with regard to transcending the masculine bias that has characterized the literature on and focus of Black politics, much less analysis of the ways in which heteronormativity has informed scholarship within Black politics and Black feminist politics research has occurred. As Black feminist political scientist Julia Jordan-Zachery has argued, “we have to move beyond upper-class, heterosexual women as our model.”

Jordan-Zachery’s prescription is imperative because if all Black womxn’s lives are not prioritized in Black feminist political science research and analyses, then the explanatory and analytical power, and overall usefulness, of Black feminism in political science will remain limited. Consequently, I employed exploratory case studies to build upon the work of Black feminist political scientists by examining an alternative frame of reference that is inclusive of Black persons and groups marginalized because of their gender and sexual identities. A qualitative content analysis was relied upon to examine the activist scholarship of Barbara Smith and Cathy J. Cohen with the objective of ascertaining and synthesizing a Black queer feminist frame of reference from their

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political thought. The findings have suggested that a Black queer feminist frame of reference has the potential to broaden the scope of what we consider “political,” where we locate power dynamics and struggles, and uncover the nuances and complexities of the politics of racialized gender and sexuality.

While Black queer feminism provides a frame of reference for understanding “traditional” political behavior, for example the voting behavior and policy preferences of queer and trans people, and could be operationalized for quantitative attitudinal research, it also moves scholars beyond orthodox disciplinary delimitations to reexamine how the queering of particular populations by the heteropatriarchal capitalist state explains a group’s political worldview and experiences. The discussion of this dissertation continued the observations put forward in the literature review by placing Black queer feminist politics in conversation with political science, with a specific focus on the politics of knowledge (production) within the discipline and academia more broadly. The discussion has underlined that a Black queer feminist approach to research and theorizing in political science can stimulate knowledge production that disrupts hegemonic epistemic frameworks and research. Indeed, Smith and Cohen have continued to challenge and disrupt the injustices that are present within academia and publishing through their deployment of Black queer feminist politics.

Utilizing the Black queer feminist frame of reference synthesized in this dissertation’s findings will provide scholars with additional conceptual and theoretical tools to understand, explain, and strategize in our social and political world. By centering Black queer feminist political thought this study has made important contributions to the
discipline, including building upon the extant frames produced by Black political scientists. This dissertation has also generated new knowledge about the scope, possibility, and relevance of political science in two additional ways. First, by exploring an alternative frame to analyze Black womxn and LGBTQ politics I have offered a different approach to studying Black politics, women and politics, and LGBTQ politics. Secondly, a Black queer feminist frame of reference aids in the integration of literatures that are currently understood as discursively distinct. These sub-disciplinary disjunctions have erased Black queer womxn, and Black queer and trans people at large. Ultimately, this dissertation has generated counter-hegemonic knowledge with the intent to expand the discipline while also challenging the rigidity of what and who counts as "legitimate" subjects for political science inquiries.

The political thought of Smith and Cohen seeks to expose oppressive systems, demystify the nature of political power, and ultimately facilitate systemic transformation. We are all beneficiaries of this Black queer feminist bounty, and even the more fortunate as Smith’s and Cohen’s multifaceted political work is ongoing. In closing, I must reemphasize that this dissertation represents only the key findings interpreted from one researcher’s standpoint. Smith’s and Cohen’s work merits further critical engagement in which their ideas continue to be struggled with, analyzed, and applied. One dissertation can only do so much justice to their ideas, though I hope the significance and possibilities of Smith’s and Cohen’s political thought has been imparted to those who are unfamiliar with their work. In general, there is still much work to do vis-à-vis Black queer and trans political thought within the discipline. In Cohen’s own words, “the critical nature of
Theorizing is not its difficulty but in fact who are we doing it with so that in fact multiple people can help us think about and analyze the situation so that we can move forward.”

Recommendations for Future Research

A Black queer feminist frame of reference reveals that more phenomena is in need of exploration, furthering the role and potential of political science to generate innovate policy solutions to address sociopolitical problems. A Black queer feminist frame engenders new questions, sometimes applied to previously examined problems while at other times applied to phenomena still in need of attention. This frame additionally reconceptualizes extant concepts with reference to queer and trans political experience, such as Cohen’s articulation of an active and unifying queer politics, a deeper and more nuanced idea of gender, and Smith’s reclamation of the radical concept of identity politics for collective political organizing. Certainly, there is no shortage of phenomena that can benefit from a Black queer feminist analysis, including macro level problems such as the prison industrial complex and the intersections of racial capitalism and queer subjects. I highlight only a few of my own curiosities here, those that center a

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meso level analysis of Black communities to demonstrate the possibilities of this frame of reference for political science inquiries.

For instance, Black queer feminism can provide context for studies exploring abuses of power as it relates to gender and sexual violence, including when this violence and discrimination manifests within the discipline.\textsuperscript{4} Unequal distributions of power in public space are an additional topic to explore, as public space is so often racialized, gendered masculine, and cis-heteronormative. Building upon the work of Davis,\textsuperscript{5} scholars may examine how the street harassment (i.e. the sexual and gender harassment of people in public space) of queer and trans individuals affects the experience of public space by threatening bodily autonomy and freedom of movement, and further facilitates the murders of Black trans womxn. The targeted street harassment (and deadly violence) against all womxn, queer, and trans individuals signifies that these groups remain questionable within the polity and are encumbered in their quest to live with full dignity and freedom of mobility.

I am equally intrigued by the theoretical and empirical possibilities resulting from the application of a Black queer feminist frame of reference to politics at HBCUs. What can a Black queer feminist analysis uncover about queer and trans discrimination on campus? How does cis-heteronormativity contribute to the gender violence womxn and


LGBTQ students (and faculty) confront? How do womxn, queer, and trans students organize and advocate for policy and curricula change within these heteropatriarchal community institutions that often subscribe to white supremacist norms and gender scripts? Might a Black queer feminist frame of reference inform their activism? Further, with new admission policy changes that inscribe the acceptance of transgender students to single-gender HBCUs, what other policy recommendations may be necessary to ensure that these students have an equitable campus experience after they arrive? How might a Black queer feminist approach inform these questions and solutions?

As mentioned in Chapter I, this dissertation began from the political thought of Smith and Cohen, Black lesbian feminists, however there are far more examples of Black queer feminist theorizing that merit serious scholarly attention. Black political scientists must continue to explore the political thought of Black trans womxn, as well as trans masculine perspectives. Indeed, outside of the discipline there is a growing body of thought on Black trans feminism. Black queer feminism is only one strand of a multidimensional theoretical space and praxis that underlines the intersections of gender, racial, and sexual oppression, state power, and economic exploitation.

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In the Black political scientist activist-scholar tradition, scholars embracing a Black queer feminist analysis will continue to demonstrate the necessity of interdisciplinary knowledge, challenge the assumptions that exclude certain groups, and produce scholarship in an effort to create more just world. As Mack H. Jones reminds us, “we are the ones who are paid and given the time to study and think about politics. We have a responsibility to produce coherent, insightful interpretations of our practice as a people, interpretations that serve as bridges from one movement to the next and from one generation to the next.”

Such bridging can be seen within the contemporary formation of the NCOBPS which has recognized the significance of Black queer and trans politics, and scholars, through the LGBTQ Caucus. Black political science must continue moving forward. Following the intellectual ground cultivated by Smith and Cohen, we must begin to write Black queer feminism into the discipline, further illuminating the sociopolitical lives and radical struggles of Black queer and trans people.

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APPENDIX A

Qualitative Content Analysis Data Sources

Cathy J. Cohen

Textual Data Sources


Audio and Visual Data Sources


Barbara Smith

**Textual Data Sources**


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1 This video includes a transcript: https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/55722/Cohen_U_E_102806.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y.
Audio and Visual Data Sources


2 This video includes a transcript: http://feministfreedomwarriors.org/uploadfolder/Barbara%20Smith.pdf.
APPENDIX B

Guidelines for Employing a Black Queer Feminist Frame of Reference

Listed below are the key assumptions of a Black queer feminist frame of reference as reported in Chapter V (Findings). These assumptions can be used as guidelines for research studies and theoretical inquiries concerned with a Black queer feminist analysis.

1. Analyze (normative) power
2. Link sexism and (cis)heterosexism (with an analysis of racial and economic oppression)
3. Organize around and foreground the voices of the most marginalized, in particular the poor, queer and trans womxn, and queer and trans individuals generally in Black communities
4. Emphasize the necessity of, and generate solutions towards, systemic transformation
5. Local, national, and international in geopolitical scope
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