

Notes on "Standpoint Social Contract"

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In my book *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* (February 2007), I posited the existence of a standpoint social contract. With this term, I sought a fuller explanation of the intersecting characteristics of cultural identity, social connections, and relationships between individuals and institutions.

Standpoint social contract combines three connected aspects of human (the focus of Anna Julia Cooper) and civic (the focus of Mary McLeod Bethune) *relationships*: standpoint (individual identity), social (social context), and contract (the state or other structured institution).

By way of explanation, I wrote:

Historic Black collegiate women were caught in a unique social contract because of the intersection of their race and gender. Using a framework based on Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Carol Pateman's *Sexual Contract*, and Charles Mills's *Racial Contract*, in this research I posit the existence of a *standpoint social contract* for Black women that is an intersection of the racial and sexual contracts. The framers of this nation's Constitution—without input from those designated as noncitizens—penned a foundational agreement that hinged upon Black women's subjugated position. This contract mandated that Black women be ignorant, silent, and subservient. Although Black women are not a homogeneous group and differ in ethnicity, nationality, religion, occupation, and sexuality, their shared experiences created a recognizable standpoint, or social location, for Black women. Common in their experience was their relation to this contract that excluded all Black women from political participation and social equity. Despite the failings of the original contract, I reclaim use of social contract theory by revisiting Rousseau's idea of a contract as an "act of association."

In this history, I uncover evidence that African American women, especially those who entered the academy, attempted to fully participate in defining the national and international "common will." This record of Black women's educational attainment refutes interpretations that portray them solely as objectified victims. Rather, I find that these historical narratives demonstrate that Black women have crafted a social contract that exposes a contested relationship between individuals and public institutions, where Black women have engaged in defining and determining their roles, even within oppressive structures. This research exposes dynamics of a social group's struggle for membership within institutions of knowledge production, and using the idea of a contract as a metaphor introduces a language that allows us to move beyond the "outsider within" victimization interpretations of Black women's public history. In short, this use of the term *contract* as a theoretical tool restores the agency of Black women by recognizing their historic powers of negotiation despite ever-present structural barriers.

Adding on to my initial thoughts, (in a footnote that did not make the final draft of the book), I articulated my conscious use of "contract" by stating, "There are certain drawbacks to this use of the term "contract." Defining human experience in economic-legal language is often used to dehumanize groups of people. The business of "supply and demand" rationalizes power differentials in a mutation of social Darwinism and defines social hierarchies and disparities in resource distribution as inevitable rather than preventable or optional. Additionally, discourses of "nationality" and "citizenship" can undermine transnational critical race theories by narrowly focusing on the United States and by constructing a nationalism that obscures the need for global human freedom. Given the historical circumstances of Black women in the Academy, however, careful invocation of the economic and civic language of social contract theory is most appropriate. They are, and have in fact always been, a part of the social, political, and economic negotiations or building of nation-states—even if they have not been recognized as such."

Of course, many have influenced my development of this theory. In addition to Rousseau, Pateman, and Mills, my ideas about the relationship of individuals to society and the state have been informed by Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, Gwen Kirk & Margo Okazawa-Rey's *Social Location* (micro, meso, macro, global), and Mauriane Adams' *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. I have especially gravitated towards Kirk & Okazawa-Rey's social location theory because, unlike Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) four levels in the Human Ecological System Theory, Kirk and Okazawa-Rey include the global perspective in their analysis. Additionally, my intellectual development has greatly benefited from works in Black studies (John Bracey, Molefi Asante, James Conyers, John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles, Perry Hall) and women's studies (Sandra Harding, Gesa Kirsch, Barbara Ehrenreich) and Black women's studies (Darlene Clark Hine, Paula Giddings, bell hooks, Alice Walker in addition to Collins). My theoretical approach, like my historical research, cannot be situated solely in Black studies or women's studies, it is situated in both. Yet, my ideas speak to those identities beyond "blackness," "womanhood," or even "Black womanhood."

Standpoint social contract, combines contract theories like that of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau with the standpoint aspects of scholars like Pateman, Mills, and Collins. My approach builds on these past explanations by allowing for--in essence-- a universal consideration of particular relationships. Black women represent one possible constituency of the standpoint social contract. Gay Latino males represent another possible constituency, as do Chinese immigrants of the 1800s, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexual males of the 1600s, or any number of individuals with a multitude of identity characteristics in various places and times. *My understanding of political philosophy is minimal*, but it was helpful for me to consider what has been written before in order to articulate my own fundamental assumptions and observations in my research on African American women in higher education. My assertion of a standpoint social contract demonstrates that every individual has a complex identity which in turn complicates their relation to society and governmental institutions.

Institutions can be "the state" or a legal entity, but can also be a private institution, like some schools or churches, that are a formally organized. An example of the usefulness of standpoint social contract can be seen in the social/legal institution of "education" in the United States (public or private from pre-K to post-graduate). In 1938, John Dewey wrote that experience impacts education. I argue, as he did, that identity impacts experience, thus cultural identity impacts education. Standpoint social contract complicates the ways we understand how individuals create and experience "identity" and how families, affinity groups, organizations, systems, or nations relate to each other.

Ten years before my standpoint social contract theory, I constructed a typology to describe identity characteristics beyond "race, class, and gender." The [SCAARRS](#) worksheet is an (admittedly incomplete but) earnest attempt to extend the described markings of cultural identity in order to represent sameness and difference in a broader way. As have Black women before me, I make sense of the world from my cultural standpoint; as Pat Parker wrote, "First...forget I'm a Black woman, second...NEVER forget I'm a Black woman." Of course White males have *influenced* part of my thinking process, but they certainly do not make up the origin or endpoint of my ideas. My research is influenced by celebrated theorists like Dewey (experience and education) Foucault (power), Derrida (deconstruction), but is more directly impacted by experience as a Black woman and by reading Black women thinkers--particularly Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune who predated those hailed and much-cited "philosophers."

A theory is an explanation. *Standpoint social contract* is my effort to classify, clarify, and explain the dynamics behind the construction of individual, social, and institutional relationships.