



What Do African American Women Voices Say to Us about Democratic Civic Engagement in Indiana

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Like Hanna and her companions, many of Indiana's black farmers had come from long-free southern families. ((Lassiter, Luke, Hurley, Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell, and Michelle Johnson, *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community*, Altonville, New York, 2004, p. 50)

1. Law as Written and Law as Practiced:

Like Hanna and all African American women who were to follow in her pioneering footsteps what do the issues analyzed in this book tell us about democracy and civic engagement in Indiana politics and policies? If 'the people' believe that slavery or gender discrimination is legitimate or useful for their daily lives what do these behaviors and actions say about how democracy and civic engagement? The high ideals expressed can be circumvented and the very ideals that they are supposed to be upholding are denied or delayed.

A set of laws may be proposed and legislated into law on the national level but ignored on the state level. We can outlaw the Klan on the national level. But if those sworn to uphold these laws on the local level belong to the very organizations they are supposed to be outlawing then democracy is denied even as it is being touted as a reality.

*The 1851 Constitution...prohibited black children from attending public (i.e. white) schools, even though their parents were still required to pay taxes (Lassiter, Luke, Hurley, Goddall, Elizabeth Campbell, and Michelle Johnson, *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community*, Altonville, New York, 2004, p. 50)*

In this document 'politics' and 'political' are seen in different contexts by African American women. Their definitions come from family and neighborhood and religious foundations. There is a context reminiscent of Harry Boyte's 'backyard revolutions'. Where politics is 'done' and not only in the legislative halls and executives offices of electoral politics. To gain insight into African American lives we must step outside convention ways of 'learning' about people's actions and behaviors. Here is where civic engagement begins. Here is where we learn about people and what moves them on the grassroots levels of society in the United States.

We have such a small idea of political that we miss a lot of what politics is all about. This cultural and pedagogical ignorance is not positive for the health of democracy. We claim pluralism, yet we pass laws as if only one ethnic group mattered: West European Anglo-Saxon.

We do not look where African American women are active. We exclude their activities and vice as extraneous noise. White Americans write history and their view is closed in and exclusive. African Americans and their lives and histories are not there and not a part of 'real' affairs in the United States. (Robbins, Coy, 1994, p. 1). But in the end we need to learn that democracy proposed on high and denied at the grassroots will continue to turn a blind eye to the.

2. Multiple Voices Make up The Choir:

The focus of this study has always been to provide a platform for African American women who live and work in Indiana to be heard. It is their voices; unfiltered and unmediated that is central here. What I have done in the “in their own voice” chapters is to provide such a platform. I strove to be an honest scribe who faithfully set forth their concerns on issues I will discuss here.

These ‘voices’ taken together will illustrate a mosaic which will present several ‘voices’ that have not been heard. By listening to these voices, we will be more able to make visible how grassroots civic engagement by these Indiana based African American women have helped to develop and maintain democracy in Indiana, and by extension, the United States.

3. Education:

Education means many things to these women. Education can be what you learn by being alive and associating with other people. The type of education that we all gain over the back fence, the education we garner from our own neighborhoods. The kind that still goes on in some neighborhoods where everyone in the neighborhood is there to educate neighborhood residents. Education is also the traditional route taken involving work beyond high school.

The women in this study have taken each of these routes. For example, Wanda Simpson started a family and joined the workforce. Karen Freeman-Wilson went to Harvard University. Wanda and Karen are both two who have both made substantial contributions to their neighborhoods and beyond.

4. Religion:

Religion is seen as stereotypically an activity that is essential African American women. Doris Anne McDougal became a Protestant minister and serves a congregation in Indianapolis. Mary Margaret Johnson grew up Protestant and then converted to Roman Catholicism. Karen Freeman-Wilson thinks that Church and religion does not always these days fulfill the function that church did when she as a child. Religion helps create a buffer between their neighborhood and the wider world. Religion becomes a base from which to go out in to the world. Religion is a reason to go out into the world. Religion can also be a reason to avoid the world as ‘pagan’ and or ‘religious’.

5. Justice:

Justice is one issue has united almost all of the women. Georgia Wynn has a very simple faith that God will make all things right. Sue Roberson grew up taller and larger than many of her peers and noted the good and the not so good reality of her presence with others. Sabrina Pennington has a passion for economically deprived students as a result of growing up poor herself. Billie Flood Tyler Johnson ties her faith with a sense that we are all equal and should be treated this way. Sheila Armstead simply believes that as God’s children we are all equal. The Old Testament sense of justice seems to link many of these women’s concerns. Political sensibility links with religious fervor to create a concrete bulwark against people and institutions that would deny or delay these women’s sense of what needs to be done.

6. Family:

Family is the glue for these women’s neighborhood experience. Family is where these African American women find their own sense of self. Family is where they connect with and modeled themselves after family members. These role models are often an aunt or a grandmother. Family is that place where these African American women feel at home even when these families do not always include a father. Marion Blalock is an example here of thriving in a non-traditional version of family.

7. Race and Gender:

All of these women are affected by race and gender. Some of these women consider race to be more significant while others saw the opposite: gender more significant than race. These issues are significant within and outside the broader African American communities. These issues affect concerns between African American men and women regarding family leadership and church activities. Mary Margaret Johnson wants to make sure that her female granddaughters know their heritage. While for Karen Freeman-Wilson, race is other people's problem and not hers. Race and gender affect these women's education and work choice. Lucinda Wright sees both race and gender as an issue. While Sabrina Pennington's comment is that she was black and that is that.

8. Politics and Civic Engagement:

Politics and civic engagement are fascinating issues for me. I come into the study with the sense that these issues are neighborhood matters such as associations and organizational. But grassroots means potlucks, family issues, and church socials. It is from these activities that politics and civic engagement grows for African Americans in general. African American women are key to the success of these issues. They take on the leading roles in many cases. Their concerns are family and neighborhood. What affects the 'hood, affects them. School lunches and safe homes spur these women into the civic sphere to remedy these issues. Politics is simply a way to facilitate the solutions that they seek to these issues. Etta Lundy, who served for many years on the Richmond City Council, began her term and stayed because it was useful to her neighborhood. Karen Freeman-Wilson ran for office because she saw how important civic engagement was to her parent's life and to the church where she developed a desire to serve.

9. Neighborhood:

A consistent theme with these women is that neighborhood is the glue that keeps them all together. Neighborhood is a corporate family. Neighborhood is the fortified castle and the welcome oasis. Neighborhood is where they develop their sense of self and other. Neighborhood is always there. Sue Roberson moved from one part of town to another part of town but kept ties and visited both neighborhoods. Lucinda Wright has lived in the same neighborhood all of her life. Mary Margaret Johnson moved away from Richmond, but returned to that same neighborhood when a family crisis compelled her to return. Billie Food Tyler Johnson see neighborhood as a safe harbor. Vicki Robinson's neighborhood "had a profound effect on which she is."

10. Analysis of In Their Own Voice Materials: What Do We Now Know About African American Women in Indiana from Their Own Voices about Democracy and Grass Roots Civic Engagement

11. Community:

Community is why these African American women do what they do. Community is their spur for action. Community is seen closer to home than we might otherwise assume. Community for African American women is neighborhood, family and church. These African American women will do what they have to do to maintain, encourage and preserve what they see as their basic community or communities.

12. Call and Response of Public Service:

These African American women use public resources to get the job completed. These women see and use current structures in which they are involved to create places for issues of interest and impact for African Americans in general but for all citizens in particular. These African American women see service to self, to community, to family, and to race and gender as important. They see these issues in different ways because

they move in different environments but with some similar root concerns.

13. Multi-tasking and Sense of Self for Others:

These African American women see themselves as part of others. They take community seriously. One of their strengths is their interlocking relationships. When issues develop either within the community or in extraneous issues these women draw on a wide array of support that are not always visible to outsiders.

14. Loyalty to Primary Groups:

These African American women are very loyal to those who they consider to be primary to them. These 'primary' relationships are family and neighborhood centered but can and often does expand to others they consider to be essential. Men are in these groups if they are supportive.

15. Not Racist but Not Passive:

These African American women do not use race to advance their agendas but are aware that race is critical to many of the achievements they seek to advance. These African American women are not averse to using the fact that others see race as an issue to advance their concerns. The central reality is that others see race as essential and these women take this perceived reality as a part of the practical reality of getting the job done.

16. Non-Traditional but Steadfast in Action and Belief:

These African American women come from multiple primary families and culturally diverse environmental contexts. Two parents and children is not always their primary context but family is family and neighborhood loyalty is neighborhood loyalty. These contextual differences allow these African American women to develop flexible approaches to life which allows them to meet issues as they arise regardless of what is culturally seen as normal. These so-called abnormalities are often seen as negative or ancillary. In fact they are some of the most dominant reasons for success even if not an aspect for many mainstream research plans.

17. Justice as Fundamental Regardless of Reciprocal Actions:

These African American women have a strong and deep commitment to justice. This concern for justice is strong. It comes from a concern for democratic structures or religion and church. Justice is often combined or intertwined with their concern for neighborhood and family.

18. True Mix of Grassroots Democracy and Civic Engagement because it is Right: Political in Greek and Roman sense-Civitas: Civic Engagement:

These African American women demonstrate a true sense of grass roots democracy and civic engagement. They consciously discount any selfish rationale for their actions. Even when what they do is by all account not political (like running for public office) their sense of self is communal and not individual. This broad base allows their individual actions to be more effective because they have a communal base for their individual actions.

19. Rooted but not Tangled:

These African American women have strong roots in community even as these roots are multiple and diverse. These roots are family, community, church, justice. These roots are not tangled but clear and strong. There is a sense of connectedness with these various root systems. These African American women use these roots to intersect with each other. This interconnectedness strengthens each separate system that can be

drawn in different scenarios when needed. Needs are determined as we have seen with Boyte's "neighborhood" and Palmer's creative 'mess'. There is no set route or no calculated activity. Thus there is no way to automatically assess the strength or path. Civitas depends on concerted action in the time and place. A strong root system allows for the flow of action to move where needed when needed.

20. Gender Important for Sense of Self:

These African American women have a strong sense of who they are as women. They look to other African American women as models whether those female role models are parents, grandparents, or siblings. There is often a mix with male models but there are always female models. There are gender conflicts between African American women and men. Some of these gender difficulties are created outside the African American community such as culturally induced economic issues where women are the main providers of household finances. There are inside the community issues which revolve around women providing the economic ability for the church to survive but then being denied a seat where the distributions of those funds are appropriated.

21. DuBois's "Twoness" may actually be "Threeness":

W.E.B. DuBois, at the beginning at the last century suggested that African Americans in the United States lived two lives: as women and men and as African Americans. This 'twoness' may well be 'threeness' for African American women in the United States. African American women in the United States, and certainly in Indiana, need to be aware of all three positions; person, female, African American. Maybe four: African American female within and outside of the African American community. Their roots in neighborhood, family, church and gender and racial identification provide strong foundations to navigate these many roles. African American women in Indiana specifically have these many bulwarks against the many tugs and pulls of inside and outside issues. Their deep roots in local realities and civic democratic tools are used to succeed. They provide a sound system to work from. They move about in various scenarios to see how and why they succeed in hostile they encounter.

22. Basic Neighborhood Experience Allows for Stable Response to Other Neighborhoods Encountered Later in Life:

These African American women learn how to navigate primary neighborhoods that are diverse in composition and economic situations. Many of these women grew up in mixed neighborhoods, which provide them with skills and tools to negotiate this mixed gender, racial, and economic situations. They learn the various cultural codes to live within diverse communities. They learn what images other people held about them and how to promote their issues when working with other people. Maybe a lack of this diversity is a major reason why many Caucasians have a difficult time negotiating, working, and living with people of color.

23. Religion Central for Different Reasons:

Religion is fundamental for some of these women. Religion is their rock and their foundation, the place they go start to finish. For others, religion is a disappointment. Religion is supposed to be a beacon to the world of what is right and good. But religion is a disappointment because religion has been used to line certain people's pocket at the exclusion of the members of a particular church or tenets of belief. Religion is the basis of some of their secular views on religion. Religion and church is where they learned how to do well. Their secular activities are based on the dictate "here I am, send me". Religion is not one brand for these women. Regardless, religion is present.

24. My Voice:

Democracy that is based on the fundamental tenets of family, spirituality, neighborhood, community, and concern for self AND for other is the basis of a sound and viable democracy. A dynamic civically engaged democracy is based on people who have a diverse and yes a messy reality. Any group or individual who successfully engages in both of these activities are groups or individuals who need to be a part of any discussion of democratic success. Democracy is not easy to find.

Civic engagement skills are essential skills to be found, discussed and applied. Anytime we are able to document such activity we should do so. When we do not do so we are creating avenues where democracy and civic engagement can be ignored or hidden. Such distractions are destructive of developing and maintaining both these essential traits. We must always begin at the grass roots and move from there to develop our sense and definition of the 'people'. Here is where the basic strains of the people's vive must be heard. And thus we come back to the reason why African American women's voices need to be part of the discussion. When any group's voices are not heard, democracy and civic engagement are denied. Denying any vital sources we can point to need to be seen. They should not be hidden in plain sight but admitted to the democratic chorus.

*This presentation comes from a book African Women in Indiana recently published by Mellen Press (2016)