

Dissenting Voices

Volume 7 | Issue 1

8-27-2018

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Repository Citation

Morse, Bailey (2018) "Freedom en el fin del Mundo: Antarctica as the Key to Renegotiating Identity-Based Power Hierarchies," *Dissenting Voices*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dissentingvoices/vol7/iss1/10>

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Freedom en el fin del Mundo: Antarctica as the Key to Renegotiating Identity-Based Power Hierarchies

In all the world's cultures, there exists a hierarchy of power maintained through cultural norms and institutions. In every culture, however, these hierarchies exist differently. So when put into a space where our culture and idea of identity-based power hierarchies is different from the ones around us, how do we negotiate our power in that space, and in doing so, how do we diminish the power of others? By looking at cultural "blank-slate" territories such as Antarctica, we may be able to better understand negotiations of identity-based power hierarchy and subsequently be able to tear down the institutions that constitute who is equal and who is not.

Introduction

Three people walk into a bar: a black man in his mid-twenties who is physically handicapped, a white person who presents them self androgynously and looks to be in the mid-thirties, and a Muslim woman wearing a hijab who appears to be in her early fifties. I know what you are thinking: not another tasteless joke that relies on stereotypes for humor. But bear with me. Assuming this bar is in the United States, it would be likely for all three of these people to be discriminated against, whether in prejudice, bias, or pure overcompensation for trying to appear un-prejudiced or biased.

Be it because of their gender identity, race, sexual orientation, physical abilities, religion, or the perceived position on the spectrum of any of these categories, the world at large has a habit of creating binaries out of what sociologists consider “dominant” and “marginalized” identity characteristics (Table 1 provides an incomplete list of examples). In the majority of the world, this gives people who belong to “dominant” identities more advantages, such as availability of employment, absence of micro aggressions, etc. These dominant and marginalized identities are largely established and maintained through a country’s norms

and institutions, as well as other factors that add up to what sociologists would consider “culture.” Deviating from the definition of society-at-large, the American Sociological Association (2018) defines culture as, “languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful” (para. 1). Though there are “cultural universals” that we recognize globally, such as a family structures, the majority of culture is community-based and varies greatly even between neighboring communities.

Identity Category	Dominant	Marginalized
Gender	Cisgender man	Woman, non-binary, transgender
Race	White	Person of color
Sexuality	Heterosexual	LGBTQIA+
Religion	Christian	Non-Christian
Socioeconomic Status	Middle/upper class	Working class
Education	College degree	High school degree/GED
Age	Working age	Youth/teenagers, retirement age
Ability	Able bodied	Differently abled

Table 1. Identities

Antarctica has no indigenous population. The hostile and inhospitable climate make it almost inconceivable for the continent to hold human life. Let alone for human life to thrive there, before modern technologies like electricity and temperature controlled central air. However, in recent decades, research bases have been set up to host scientists on the continent for prolonged periods of time. Most researchers stay for up to one year at a time, some for longer periods, and some for shorter. Many of these researchers return year after year to continue their studies and experiences. Due to the absence of indigenous people on the continent, it is only logical that researchers on Antarctic bases have come there from all over the world, each having an established culture in their home country with normalized power dynamics. In terms of culture, this constitutes what we will consider a “blank-slate” territory, which has slowly built up and rebuilt its culture with each influx of new researchers. “Isolated and drawn together in a hostile environment, people have developed a knowledge of the continent and its life and, as it evolved, of their own culture” (Martin, 1996, p.21).

In this negotiation, every facet of the new culture can be considered an “import” from other places in the world. Within this, sociologists identify new sets of dominant and marginalized

identities and the power hierarchies that correspond. While in their naturalized culture, a person has been taught or socialized to believe that their identity brings a specific amount of power to the table, this amount of power likely differs from that of the naturalized culture of the next person. Historically, one of the most prevalent forms of power hierarchy and dominant / marginalized identity can be found almost globally within gender power dynamics. According to Nancy Bonvillain (1998), author of *Men and Women: Cultural Constructs of Gender*.

Females and males are born, but women and men are products of enculturation... we attend to the expressed and hidden ideological messages about women's and men's place in their families and communities and about their social value. These messages are often symbolized in religious beliefs and practices. They are conveyed as well in subtle ways through language by words and expressions that label men and women or describe their activities (p. 1).

Here, along with pointing to the distinction between sex and gender, Bonvillain (1998) outlines the ways in which our environments create binaries and power hierarchies in our day-to-day lives. These binaries can prevent women and those who are gender non-conforming (outside the gender binary) from pursuing opportunities, managing their own finances, and even speaking in

a public meeting. Originally thought to stem from divisions of labor, gender segregation and inequality continues to be perpetuated through economic means (Bonvillain, 1998).

Women in the Antarctic

When Caroline Mikkelsen first arrived in Antarctica in 1935, she became recognized as the first woman to ever go to Antarctica. Though she did self-identify as an explorer, Mikkelsen did not spend her time on the continent, her place on the expedition was not as such, but rather as a companion to her husband, Klarius Mikkelsen, a Norwegian ship captain. A similar scenario presented itself to Jennie Darlington (1956) who wintered-over on the continent not on her own accord, but rather on her honeymoon with husband Harry Darlington in the winter of 1947-48. As one of the first women to ever winter-over in Antarctica, Darlington (1956) recounted her misgivings as well as her liberations, having experienced blizzards, tragedy, and pregnancy alike, in her memoir, *My Antarctic Honeymoon* (Darlington, 1956).

Though they were among the first women to arrive on the continent in a “modern,” non-nomadic context, they were not the first to try. Throughout the previous century, countless women applied to scientific expedition teams in hopes to be able to participate in the

“Heroic Age” of the Antarctic (1897-1922). In her publication, “Frozen Voices: Women, Silence and Antarctica,” author Jessie Blackadder (2015) discusses the many attempts by women to find room in these male dominated expeditions. Found in the records of the famed explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton (as cited in Blackadder, 2015), who made his voyage in the early 20th century, was a letter from a group of young women who had hoped to join his expedition:

We are three strong healthy girls, and also gay and bright, and willing to undergo any hardships, that you yourself undergo. If our feminine garb is inconvenient, we should just love to don masculine attire. We have been reading all books and articles that have been written on dangerous expeditions by brave men to the Polar regions, and we do not see why men should have the glory, and women none, especially when there are women just as brave and capable as there are men (Blackadder, 2015, p. 170-171).

Despite their best efforts, the women were barred from joining the expedition, and not for the first or last time. According to Blackadder (2015), despite expansion of exploration and technology in the Antarctic, women still were deemed unfit for expedition.

Twenty-five women applied to join Mawson’s British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE) in 1929 and in 1937 the

extraordinary number of 1,300 women applied to join the proposed British Antarctic Expedition. None were successful in being permitted to travel to Antarctica (Blackadder, 2015, p. 171).

It was not until much later on, closer to the mid-twentieth century, that women began receiving equal right to travel to the Antarctic continent. This caveat must be emphasized, because although women finally made it to the continent, this did not necessarily mean that they had achieved any sort of gender equity in doing so.

When she arrived on the continent, researcher Irene C. Peden (1998) did not do so without tribulation. Before she was the first U.S. woman to set foot in the Antarctic interior, Peden was another statistic of rejected intellect. In her publication, “If You Fail, There Won’t Be Another Woman on the Antarctic Continent for a Generation”, featured in *Women in the Antarctic*, Peden (1998) described this experience as a series of consistent brushes with failure and exclusion. As an associate professor of engineering, Peden was working on an Antarctic research grant through the Polar Upper Atmosphere program at the National Science Foundation. With the recognition that it would be impossible to design and implement experiments in an environment to which she had never been, Peden (1998) began the preliminary process to receive

permission to travel to the continent under the grant’s protective umbrella. It was not long before she realized that this would not be as simple as originally planned. Though she had worked on the grant for several years, she continued to be denied access to the continent housing her research, based only on her gender. Peden (1998) states:

It was a particular admiral commander of the South Pacific fleet at the time, who didn’t want to take women. All kinds of bathroom problems were mentioned- no ladies’ room on the military flight, no ladies’ room in the Antarctic- those kinds of ridiculous things. I was just staggered to find that years and years later the first woman astronaut, Sally Ride, had to put up with the same stuff. When I read that in the newspapers I thought, “Oh my God, they’re still doing it” (p. 19).

Paralleling a modern conversation about restroom rights of those who identify as transgender, it seemed unfathomable to the admiral that Peden (1998) may get on just as well in nearly any restroom that serves its originated function.

Peden finally received clearance in 1970 on the condition that another woman accompany her. Peden (1998) and her new companion, Julia Vickers, a librarian and member of the Alpine Climbing Club in Christchurch, New Zealand, set off for the continent with the weight of half the world’s population on their shoulders. When they arrived, it

was not without trial from the researchers already stationed on their assigned base, Byrd VLF Station (a substation of Byrd Station). With only six weeks to complete the research they set out to do, challenges began almost immediately. A significant portion of their equipment failed to arrive on the continent, having been put on a plane separate from the two researchers. Though scheduled to arrive right after them, the plane would not arrive until just before they were scheduled to leave the continent. As the team discussed how to approach the issue, many members believed that the mistake was actually deliberate sabotage. Peden (1998) was told by the NSF station chief at McMurdo, as well as one at Christchurch, that they must continue the experiment, warning: “We’re doing everything we can; we haven’t located your equipment. You must do your experiment on time, and if you fail, there won’t be another woman on the Antarctic Continent for a generation” (Peden, 1998, p. 25).

Though they were eventually able to modify equipment to replicate the effects of the equipment they so desperately needed, they acted as a highly visible example of the ways in which marginalized identities carry the responsibility of reputation for their entire identity group. When some women could not, or would not

complete expedition on the continent, what the world decided is that they also never would. As such, the women who came after them were forced to work even harder to overcome the precedent that she had set based on her own personal experiences. When Sister Mary Odile Cahoon (1998) wintered over on the continent in 1974, a member of the first team of woman scientists to winter over, she faced difficulties similar to that of any other scientist, man or woman, and yet faced an additional need to justify her presence there (Cahoon, 1998). Years later, when she was asked about her experiences, she noted:

The reason we specify that we were the first two women scientists to winter-over is that a couple of women wintered over with their husbands back in 1947. That was not a happy situation, apparently, and one of them said Antarctica is no place for a woman. Someone quoted that to me and asked, ‘What do you feel?’ I responded, ‘Well, if women are in science and science is in the Antarctic, then women belong there’ (Cahoon, 1998, p. 35).

Though women belong in Antarctica, we cannot say this without acknowledging that the problems that face them elsewhere continue to manifest in this “blank slate” world. On October 6th, 2017, the day after the New York Times published a tell-all on the sexual harassment history of film producer Harvey Weinstein, *Science Magazine* broke a story on geologist and

climate change researcher David Marchant, of Boston University. The article detailed a history of physically and sexually abusive behavior conducted against several women who conducted research with him on base in Antarctica (Wadman, 2017). A statement by Boston University indicated a “preponderance of ... evidence that Dr. [David] Marchant engaged in sexual harassment ... by directing derogatory and sex-based slurs and sexual comments at [the women] during the 1999-2000 field expedition to Antarctica” (Resnick, 2017, para. 4) In the original article, written by Meredith Wadman (2017), encounters between these women and Marchant were outlined in detail. One of the most disturbing was committed against Jane Willenbring. Marchant:

...regularly pelted rocks at her while she was urinating. ‘She cut her water consumption so she could last the 12-hour days far from camp without urinating, then drank liters at night,’ Wadman writes. He also allegedly blew volcanic ash into her eyes to hurt her (Resnick, 2017, para. 6).

The stories of the women victimized by Marchant, as well as the experiences of the first women to fight their way onto the continent, fall in line with what we have come to understand about the gender hierarchy in the United States and in much of the world. Because of the

power given to half of the world’s population, the other half becomes not only subordinate, but also exploited, abused, and oppressed. Despite the “blank slate” nature of the continent, the imported culture that arrives on the Antarctic continent makes this sexism no exception.

Dialogues

During my own travels in and around the Antarctic Peninsula, as well as preparing for this time before I left the United States, I was fortunate enough to find myself in dialogue with researchers who have worked on and around the continent. I was able to consult with two of these researchers about my own research. In each case, I collected a demographic survey from the consultants, as well as descriptions of their own experiences negotiating power. I asked each consultant to what degree they felt they negotiated their power on their respective research bases, what characteristic they felt this negotiation was based on, as well as whether or not they had seen anyone around them negotiating their power or being treated unfairly based on an identity-based characteristic such as gender, religion, sexuality, race, etc.. Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of the two experts I consulted.

Consultant One indicated that, although he had noticed some negotia-

tion of power within his research base, it was based largely on his education, research experience, and achieved was largely done in hierarchical settings where ranking related to authority (for example, supervisor - supervisee relationships). The fact that this is a repeated result, however, lends itself to at least some validity (Belur, 2013). In 2013, a study was done to discover more about these negotiations based on a police force in India. “It was found that while gender, ethnicity and age might have had a bearing on how the research was conducted, researcher status as an outside-insider [status as a former high ranking officer] was a more important dimension affecting all aspects of the research” (Belur, 2013, p. 196-197).

characteristics rather than ascribed characteristics. There is some bias here, as the research conducted

When considering these results, it is important to note that Consultant One by and large falls into the dominant identity categories shown in Table One. Consultant Two, with nearly opposite identities, had a much different experience. Though she indicated that she frequently found herself negotiating her power based on achieved characteristics like Consultant One, she listed several ascribed identity characteristics that played into her place in the power hierarchy, as well as observing the same things happening to those around her.

Consultant Two reported:

	Consultant One	Consultant Two
Gender	Cisgender Man	Cisgender Woman
Age	30	50
Race	White	Hispanic/Latina
Nationality	United Kingdom	Argentina
Sexuality	Heterosexual	Heterosexual
Religious Affiliation	None	None
Native Language	English	Spanish
Highest Education Level Achieved	PhD	PhD
Expedition Experience (in years since first expedition):	8	22

Table 2. Demographic Profiles of Consulted Researchers who have Worked in and Around the Antarctic Peninsula.

...the explicit and implicit bias towards me is based on my young looks, my accent and my gender. Frequently, I get asked about two things: a) do I have any family or children, and if so, who is looking after them, while none of my male colleagues get asked any personal question of that nature, and b) what is the highest level of education I achieved, and when I mention PhD it is assumed that I obtained this at a South American University. When I reply [it] is from a University in New Zealand, there is a seemingly patronizing assent of approval.

The stark difference in experience between Consultant One and Consultant Two encourages further discussion about power and privilege in hierarchical societies. This in turn creates a stronger drive to decipher exactly how these hierarchies are negotiated.

Whether Consultant One did not experience power negotiations of ascribed identity going on around him, or simply did not see them, is hard to say. Underneath this conversation of how power hierarchies come to be is another question waiting to be answered: What is the relationship between standpoint epistemology and privilege to power and privilege blindness? Women now find themselves with a relatively large degree of representation on Antarctic research bases compared to historical demographics. The phenomenon experienced by Irene C. Peden (1998) and the countless other women who have fought their way onto the continent persist in new manifestations of the same inequality. This serves to remind us that we do not, and may never, live in a post-identity hierarchy society.

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