

Bell hooks (1952-)

Gloria Jean Watkins was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in 1952. Writing in 1989, she described herself as 'a Southern girl from a working-class background who had never been on a city bus, who had never stepped on an escalator, who had never been on a plane' (p.74). Yet, adopting the pen name bell hooks, she is now recognised as one of the most important African American critical thinkers of all time. She assumed the pseudonym bell hooks for two reasons: firstly in honour of her grandmother's spirit of resilience; and secondly to establish a separate identity to voice her opinions and concerns. This was an identity consciously divorced from her own, enabling her to shift positions and change stances within her writing. hooks chooses not to capitalize her name as she feels that the ideas in her texts should speak for themselves and therefore the author is not of importance. This attitude regarding the democratization of knowledge is endemic of hooks' constant attempt to theorize the world she inhabits.

Race and Patriarchy

hooks writes prolifically on areas that inform her identity as an African American woman. In particular her work consists of an in-depth interrogation of race, class and gender. In her first academic text *Aint I a Woman*, she explores the symbiotic relationship between racism and sexism; 'No one bothered to discuss the way in which sexism operates both independently of and simultaneously with racism to oppress us' (1982, p.7). Both forms of persecution are treated as equally damaging throughout her writing. Accordingly, she traces the historical correlation between the two protest movements to summate that in order for freedom to be achieved both issues must be addressed:

As a people of color, our struggle against racial imperialism should have taught us that wherever there exists a master/slave relationship, an oppressed/oppressor relationship, violence, mutiny, and hatred will permeate all elements of life. There can be no freedom for black men as long as they advocate subjugation of black women. There can be no freedom for patriarchal men of all races as long as they advocate subjugation of women (p.117).

In particular, hooks believes that racism cannot be overcome until the black community looks at the inherent sexist attitudes which pervade all aspects of culture. She claims that the fight against racism is futile until an examination of the larger constructs of patriarchy which work to divide black men and women is undertaken. She sees sexism as a legacy that endures and works to derail the fight for equality:

Fighting against sexist oppression is important for black liberation, for as long as sexism divides black women and men we cannot concentrate our energies on resisting racism. Many of the tensions in black male/female relationships are caused by sexism and sexist oppression (1982, p.116).

What is clear from the above statement is that hooks sees patriarchy as a fundamental obstacle in tackling racist attitudes; attitudes that can be traced back to the institution of Slavery.

Black women and Slavery

hooks point out that most historians focus on how black men were metaphorically emasculated through the process of Slavery. She states:

Scholars have argued [...] that by not allowing men to assume their traditional patriarchal status, white men effectively emasculated them, reducing them to an effeminate state. Implicit in this assertion is the assumption that the worst thing that can happen to a man is that he be made to assume the social status of women (1982, p.20)

After acknowledging this critical approach, the feminist then reverses the argument to emphasise how female slaves were forced to adopt masculine traits. She writes ' While black men were not forced to assume a role colonial American society regarded as "feminine", black women were forced to assume a masculine role (p.27). Female slaves were

forced to endure hard labour both in the fields and domestic responsibilities within the white household as 'nurses, cooks, seamstresses, washerwomen and maids' (p.23). Whereas most academic writing centres on the psychological damage attributed to the African American male psyche, hooks questions why no such research has been afforded black women? To further highlight this she discusses the systematic sexual abuse experienced by female slaves.

It is no secret that plantation owners and overseers regarded slaves as chattel. Accordingly, female slaves were often subjected to rape. The physical abuse of black women was accepted as normal behaviour and went unquestioned by society. Hooks explores the impact of such degradation and physical exploitation of African American women as an on-going phenomenon. The objectification and sexual abuse experienced by women at the hands of predatory white men in positions of authority continues to have a bearing on modern ideas of black femininity:

[...] the significance of the rape of enslaved black women was not simply that it "deliberately crushed" their sexual integrity for economic ends but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the "fallen woman", the whore the slut, the prostitute (1982, p.52).

Consequently the prevalent attitudes held by white supremacists before the emancipation of slaves, still inform the way black women are represented in the media. bell hooks has frequently looked to expose the misrepresentation of black womanhood throughout her writing.

Objectification and consumption of blackness

Continuing the line of enquiry initiated in *Aint I a Woman*, ten years later hooks questioned Laura Mulvey's seminal stance regarding the 'Male Gaze'. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks points out that black people have historically been punished for looking. Here she cites

the incident where Emmett Till, a 14 year old black boy, was murdered for looking and whistling at a white woman (1992, p.118). Therefore, she believes that Feminist theory ignores the issue of race in the same way that the film industry has historically struggled to represent black womanhood on-screen. Even when African American male filmmakers attempt to depict black women, they typically objectify them which, for hooks, perpetuates the subtext of white supremacy (1992, p.118).

Critiquing Mulvey, hooks states that as a black woman she has a choice to either identify with the white actress or resist identification. The latter is the logical position, as black women do not recognize themselves on-screen as the film industry has continued to misrepresent them or ignore them entirely. Accordingly, black women adopt an 'Oppositional Gaze' or what Manthia Diawara calls 'resisting spectatorship' (1992, p.128). In embracing this attitude of rejection, black women can no longer be hurt by derogatory images of African American womanhood. Rather than agreeing with Mulvey's concept of the female being passive and the male as active, hooks laments that even when black women assume the role of director, black femininity is still victim to 'the white supremacist capitalist imperialist dominating "gaze"' (1992, p.129).

Furthermore, in the chapter 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance' (1992) hooks continues to explore the way blackness is both consumed and adopted as a political stance by the white viewer. Here, she alludes to the fascination black culture holds for a white audience and, in turn, how blackness has become a culture for consumption. She explains how 'Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (p.21). Blackness adds flavour and a sense of exotic to the mundane fare offered by white cultural producers. Using the British euphemism of fancying a 'bit of the Other' (p.22) as desiring a sexual encounter, hooks explores the interrelation between sex and otherness from a postcolonial view point.

hooks believes that the white male fascination with otherness continues to this day. She sees sexual relations between white men and black women as a similar pattern in consuming 'primitiveness'. Referencing anecdotes she overheard from white college boys at Yale University bragging about their sexual prowess with ethnic women, hooks purports that 'To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as make themselves over, to leave behind white "innocence" and enter the world of "experience"' (p.23). The

experience she refers to is once more in relation to the way the media sexualizes black womanhood.

She extends this idea of the white consumption of blackness (either physically through sexual encounters or economically via cultural commodities) as a political stand point; a rejection of colonial attitudes. Whereas some white consumers may see themselves as non-racist, (they believe their appreciation of blackness negates the problematic racial relations of the past), hooks argues that such behavioural patterns perpetuate the legacy of white supremacy and can alternatively be understood as 'imperialist nostalgia'.

In mass culture, imperialist nostalgia takes the form of re-enacting and re-ritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as a narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other. This longing is rooted in the atavistic belief that the spirit of the "primitive" resides in the bodies of dark Others whose cultures, traditions, and lifestyles may indeed be irrevocably changed by imperialism, colonization, and racist domination. The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection' (p.25).

It is the disassociation of historical context that hooks bemoans. White society typically consumes black culture as it provides 'a bit of the Other'. Yet, there is a disavowal of the historical framework within which it was produced. She suggests that in response there has been a 'Resurgence of black nationalism as an expression of black people's desire to guard against white cultural appropriation' (p.33). The more the white viewer consumes blackness that more militant and radical the cultural response from the black community; hooks talks about the fine line between cultural appropriation and appreciation as being the root of the problem here (p.39).

Talking back to 'White supremacist capitalist patriarchy'

The experience of the African American people underpins the ideology and methodology of bell hooks' entire repertoire. The oppression of the black community is a trajectory that can be traced through her extensive publications. At times she has controversially laid herself open to criticism. In the opening chapter to *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995) she provocatively declares, 'I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder' (p.8). She explains how through the mismanagement of an incident involving a wrong ticket at an airport her friend was humiliated and that the man sat beside her, although through no fault of his own, was complicit in the persecution of her companion. David Horowitz lambasted hooks' premise that the said incident revealed institutional racism within American Society and publically declared that 'if hooks killed the white man, someone else would ultimately have to be responsible, because: "even if she had done it, she did not do it. In fact white people did it"' (Glazov, 2002). This quote is testament to the way hooks manages to alienate some white readers. Her work often makes for uncomfortable reading yet in instigating debate she dares to question societal structures which are traditionally avoided.

As is evident, one of the things that sets bell hooks' work apart from other theoretical positions is her refusal to separate race from debates regarding gender and class. In the televised lecture *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* (1997) she states:

I began to use the phrase in my work "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality.

The main problems in society are threefold according to hooks. Therefore her writing attempts to deconstruct the underlying structure that restricts freedom and works to oppress marginalized groups. Rather than rigidly pursuing one agenda, hooks is instrumental in questioning the ideological building blocks of the Western world and along the way she raises many important questions.

The influence and reach of bell hooks' work is unquestionable. She deftly transcends class barriers by adopting diverse modes of communication

which speak to different demographics. Her writing manages to traverse autobiographical, theoretical, critical and pedagogical forms.

Her work challenges dominant exemplars and most importantly the position of patriarchy as a *historical* transcendental norm. Her challenge to various hegemonic practices—racism, classism, sexism, and capitalist forms of exploitation and commodification—has heavily influenced scholars in numerous areas of critical inquiry: cultural studies, feminist and womanist theory, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, film studies and critical pedagogy (Davidson & Yancy, 2009, p.8).

For hooks, sharing her views on race, gender and class through scholarly debates is part of a larger process of healing. In *Talking Back* (1989), she looks to reveal the personal pain of Gloria Jean. Using the pen name of hooks as a conduit, she faces her past and the disappointment she believes that emanates from her parents who feel she has turned her back on the community in favour of the Ivory Tower of academia. Consequently, hooks need to create can be read as a salve for her troubled soul. Almost in answer to Guyitari Spivak's question 'Can the subaltern speak'? hooks asserts:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice (1989, p.9)

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