

TALKING BACK



*thinking feminist,
thinking black*



bell hooks



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the oppression and domination of women. Words like "male domination," "feminism," or "women's liberation" are never used, and even though she can share with readers that her husband did housework while she was writing, she shares this as though many men and most importantly, the right men, automatically assume such tasks, nurturing while women do creative work.

Just as Nancy Hartsock's new work urges us to question why we are being asked to surrender a concern with the subject at this historical moment, when women have been struggling to move from object to subject, we must ask why it is women are being seduced by models of individual change that imply that no change has to occur in larger political and social realities. We must ask ourselves why this is so appealing. Why are women willing to return to old patterns, to narratives that suggest we are responsible for male domination? As feminist activists, as feminist theorists, we must acknowledge our failure to create adequate models for radical change in everyday life that would have meaning and significance to masses of women. Until we construct and unless we construct such models, feminist movement will not have revolutionary impact transforming self and society.

feminist theory: a radical agenda

Any constructive examination of feminist scholarship and its political implication must necessarily focus on feminist theory. In these times of grave political and economic crisis, as we are subjected to more overt attacks by anti-feminists who either deny the validity of feminist liberation struggle or simplify the nature of that struggle, we must be actively engaged in ongoing critical dialogue about the future of feminist movement, about the direction and shape of feminist theory.

Without liberatory feminist theory, there can be no effective feminist movement. To fulfill this purpose, feminist theory must provide a structure of analysis and thought that synthesizes that which is most visionary in feminist thinking, talk, and discourse—those models of change that emerge from our understanding of sexism and sexist oppression in everyday life, coupled with strategies of resistance that effectively eradicate domination and engage us fully in a liberatory praxis.

Given this framework, feminist theory should necessarily be directed to masses of women and men in our society, educating us collectively for critical consciousness so that we can explore and understand better the workings of sexism and sexist oppression, the political basis of feminist critique, and be better able to work out strategies for resistance. Currently in the United States, the primary site for the production of feminist theory is the corporate university, and workers in this arena are primarily university educated scholars, usually from privileged race and class backgrounds

with a few exceptions. Since the work of feminist theorists necessitates fundamental questioning and critiquing of the ideological structures of the prevailing white-supremacist, patriarchal hegemony, it is fitting that the university be identified as a useful site for radical political work, for feminist movement. It must be remembered that it is not and should not be the only site of such work. Academic women and men engaged in the production of feminist theory must be responsible for setting up ways to disseminate feminist thought that not only transcend the boundaries of the university setting, but that of the printed page as well. It is also our responsibility to promote and encourage the development of feminist theory by folks who are not academics. As long as the university remains "the" central site for the development of feminist scholarship, it will be necessary for us to examine the ways in which our work can be and is undermined.

Major problems with the production and dissemination of feminist theory are rooted in the various contradictions we confront within university settings. Increasingly, only one type of theory is seen as valuable—that which is Euro-centric, linguistically convoluted, and rooted in Western white male sexist and racially biased philosophical frameworks. Here I want to be clear that my criticism is not that feminist theorists focus on such work but that such work is increasingly seen as the only theory that has meaning and significance. This is problematic. Rather than expanding our notions of theory to include types of theory that can be produced in many different writing styles (hopefully we will even produce theory that begins with the experiential before it enters the printed stage), the vision of what theory is becomes a narrow, constricting concept. Rather than breaking down structures of domination, such theory is often employed to promote an academic elitism which embraces traditional structures of domination. Academics who produce theory along these lines often see themselves as superior to those who do not. Oppressive hierarchy is thus reinforced and maintained. Feminist theory is rapidly becoming another sphere of academic elitism, wherein work that is linguistically convoluted, which draws on other such works, is deemed more intellectually sophisticated, in fact is deemed more theoretical (since the stereotype of theory is that it is synonymous with that which is difficult to comprehend, linguistically convoluted) than work which is more accessible. Each time this happens, the radical, subversive potential of feminist scholarship and feminist theory in particular is undermined.

When Audre Lorde made that much quoted yet often misunderstood cautionary statement warning us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," she was urging us to remember that we must engage in a process of visionary thinking that transcends the ways of knowing privileged by the oppressive powerful if we are to truly make revolutionary change. She was, in the deep structure of this statement, reminding us that it is easy for women and any exploited or oppressed group to become complicit in structures of domination, using power in ways that rein-

force rather than challenge or change. As institutional structures impose values, modes of thought, ways of being on our consciousness, those of us who work in academic settings often unwittingly become engaged in the production of a feminist theory that aims to create a new sphere of theoretical elitism. Feminist scholars who do work that is not considered theoretical or intellectually rigorous are excluded from this arena of privileged bonding. This seriously undermines feminist movement. It means that we not only lose sight of the need to produce feminist theory that is directly related to the concrete lives of women and men who are most affected by sexist oppression, but that we become engaged in an unproductive and unnecessary power struggle which deflects our critical energies and defeats our purpose.

Production and dissemination of feminist theory in forms that alienate, that cannot be understood, has promoted the continued growth of feminist anti-intellectualism and intensified the antagonism toward theory that has been pervasive throughout contemporary feminist movement. Early on, feminist educators like Charlotte Bunch emphasized the need for feminist education that would seek to alter the anti-theoretical impulse many women have learned from patriarchal conditioning. When that feminist theory deemed most valuable is articulated in a form that does not allow effective communication of ideas, it reinforces the fear, especially on the part of the exploited and oppressed, that the intent of theorizing is not to liberate but to mystify. Anti-theoretical backlash tends to privilege concrete actions and experiential resistance to sexism, however narrowly focussed their impact.

As long as university settings are the central site for the production of theory and academics are simultaneously engaged in a competitive work arena that supports and perpetuates all forms of domination, feminist theorists will need to be conscientious about not supporting monolithic notions of theory. We will need to continually assert the need for multiple theories emerging from diverse perspectives in a variety of styles. Often we simply passively accept this false dichotomy between the so called "theoretical" and that writing which appears to be more directly related to the experiential.

In many feminist theory classes, this problem is addressed by including work that is taken to represent "real life" experience or fictional portrayals of concrete reality along with work that is deemed highly theoretical. Often such attempts reinforce racism and elitism by identifying writing by working-class women and women of color as "experiential" while the writing of white women represents "theory." This past year, I saw a Women's Studies feminist theory course syllabus in which the only work by a woman of color and the only non-theoretical work was Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*. Another course had a required list that included material by white women Nancy Hartsock, Zillah Eisenstein, Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine, and then *The Color Purple*. Often novels or confessional

autobiographical writings are used to mediate the tension between academic writing, theory, and the experiential. This seems to be especially the case when the issue is inclusion of works by women of color in feminist theory courses. Much of the little theoretical work done by women of color is not readily accessible—yet it can be found.

Anti-intellectual biases within feminist movement directly effect the extent to which women of color feel compelled to produce feminist theory. Many of us come from class backgrounds where intellectual activity and writing are seen as non-valuable work so we are already working to overcome this obstacle. It is profoundly disturbing to see how little feminist theory is being written by black women and other women of color. The paucity of material is not simply linked to absence of motivation; it is related to the privileging of material within feminist circles by women of color that is not only not theoretical but in some cases anti-theoretical. Why should women of color work to produce feminist theory that is likely to be ignored or devalued? How many women of color teach courses in feminist theory? Though I have done theoretical writing, I am much more likely to be asked to teach a course focussing on women and race than on theory. In those university settings where I have talked with white women who have higher rank about my desire to teach a course on feminist theory, the response is always that it is an area which is being covered already. Women of color who are theorists are devalued because of racial biases. Often our work is appropriated.

In my teaching and in my writing, I have tried, in the spirit of Charlotte Bunch (whose early writings on women and education were important precisely because they sought to encourage women not to be wary of theory), to encourage women—and particularly black women—to recognize the value and importance of theory, to acknowledge that we all use it in daily life. Theory is not an alien sphere. Even though there is much theoretical writing that may be difficult to understand, I think it useful for us not to simply dismiss or downgrade it but to talk about why it is intimidating, what possible uses it may have, and how it can be interpreted, translated, etc. so that it can be understood.

It is a disservice to black women writers and all women writers when feminist readers demand that our imaginative works serve purposes that should be addressed by feminist theory. Novels and confessional writing can and do enhance our understanding of the way individuals critically reflect about gender, the way we develop strategies to resist sexism, to change lives, but they cannot and do not take the place of theory. More importantly, it does not serve the interests of feminist movement for feminist scholars to support this unnecessary and dangerous separation of "theoretical" work and that work which focusses more on the experiential. It was disturbing to me recently to read Barbara Christian's essay, "The Race for Theory," in which she suggested again and again that black women and "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from

the Western form of abstract logic." This statement is simply inaccurate. Had it been made by a white person, I think many more people would be disturbed by its message. When I read it, I immediately thought about different groups of African people, like the Dogon, who have very abstract logical schemas to support rituals that focus on creating gendered subjects. I constantly tell students who use the word "abstract" to dismiss work that in everyday life we use both language and concepts that are very abstract. This point is made quite wonderfully in the collective work, *Female Sexualization*, edited by Frigga Haug who writes: "Contrary to reputation, our everyday language is more than a little abstract: it suppresses the concreteness of feelings, thoughts, and experiences, speaking of them only from a distance." Recently walking by a black male street person, I greeted him by saying, "Hi Ya' doing." And he responded, "Halfway, I'm just halfway." In my African-American literature course that day I used his comment to talk about abstraction, language, and interpretation; and the problem of assuming that "basic black people" or everyday folks do not use abstract theory. At one point, Barbara Christian writes, "I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple. And perhaps that is why we have not rushed to create abstract theories."

Yes! We are not rushing to create feminist theory and I for one think that is tragic. We may not be doing so precisely because of our fears of articulating that which is abstract. All theory as I see it emerges in the realm of abstraction, even that which emerges from the most concrete of everyday experiences. My goal as a feminist thinker and theorist is to take that abstraction and articulate it in a language that renders it accessible—not less complex or rigorous—but simply more accessible.

While I agree with Barbara Christian's critique of the way in which certain types of feminist theory are not seen as an "authoritative discourse," and pointing to the dangers of that is one concern of this essay, it is important that we do not resist this hierarchical tendency by devaluing theory in general. There is a place for theory that uses convoluted language, metalanguage, yet such theory cannot become the groundwork for feminist movement unless it is more accessible. It is not uncommon for women who write theory to discount its importance when questioned about how it relates to "real life," to woman's day-to-day experience. Such dismissals reinforce the misguided assumption that all theory is and has to be inaccessible. In more recent years, focus on the experiential in some feminist circles as part of attempts to deflect attention away from theoretical work has obscured critical gaps in feminist thought and blocked awareness of the pressing need for the production of visionary feminist theory. Such theory emerges only from a context in which there is either an integration of critical thinking and concrete experience or a recognition of the way in which critical ideas, abstractly formulated, will impact on everyday life experience. Visionary feminist theory must be articulated in a manner that is accessible if it is to have meaningful impact. This is not to suggest that

everyone will be able to read such work. Inability to read or write makes it impossible for masses of people to learn about written feminist theory. Literacy must become a strategic priority for feminists. Yet what cannot be read can be talked about, and talking, both in lectures and in everyday conversation, is as effective a way to share information about feminist theory as is published material. Even though the groundwork of theory may be laid in a written discourse, it need not end there.

Works of feminist scholarship and feminist theory do exist which are accessible to large numbers of readers and which can be easily discussed. To name a few: *Class and Feminism* edited by Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron (1974); *Women and the New World*, an anonymous pamphlet published in 1976; *Top Ranking: Essays on Racism and Classism in Lesbian Communities* edited by Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett (1979); *Building Feminist Theory* (1981); and *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* by Marilyn Frye. Most of these works would not appear on the syllabi of feminist theory courses today. In fact, with one or two exceptions, this material is out of print, hard to find, or not well known. Significantly, work within feminist theory that is difficult to comprehend is more likely to be read in theory courses, especially on the graduate level. The recent rise to prominence of a particular style of French feminist theory which is linguistically convoluted is an example of this trend. While such work enriches our understanding of gender politics, it is important to remember that this is not a universal discourse, that it is politically and culturally specific, and emerges from specific relationships particular French feminist scholars have to their political and social reality. Two thinkers whose work immediately comes to mind are Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Women*) and Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language*). Although this work honors the relationship between feminist discourse and political practice, it is often used within university settings to establish a select intellectual elite and to reinforce and perpetuate systems of domination, most obviously white Western cultural imperialism. When any feminist theory is employed in this way, feminist movement to end sexist domination is undermined.

At this particular stage of feminist movement in the United States, feminist scholars must pause to reconsider the approach we take to our work within the university. We must be willing to critically examine anew the tensions that arise when we simultaneously try to educate in such a way as to ensure the progression of a liberatory feminist movement and work to create a respected place for feminist scholarship within academic institutions. We must also reexamine the tensions that arise when we try to subvert while working to keep jobs, to be promoted, etc. These practical concerns are factors that influence and/or determine the type of scholarship deemed important. Often, attempts to mediate or reconcile these tensions lead to frustration, despair, cooptation, complicity, or shifts in allegiance. To reaffirm the primacy of feminist struggle, feminist scholars must renew our collective commitment to a radical theoretical agenda, to

a feminist education that is the practice of freedom. We begin this task by acknowledging that feminist theory is losing its vital connection to feminist struggle and that connection must be firmly reestablished and understood if our work is to have significant political impact.