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## Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory

By Hazel Tionloc Biana<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, feminist theorist bell hooks questioned the existing feminist discourses during her time by pointing out the lack of a solid definition of feminism and the predominance of white, privileged feminists in the movement. Although several other feminist theorists have made the same criticisms, what sets hooks apart is her invitation to a revolutionary feminist outlook, which uses a pluralistic lens to recognize the absence of oppressed groups and the interrogation of cultural representations. Even before “intersectionality” became a buzzword in feminist circles, hooks has already been talking about the interlocking webs of oppression, a concept that most feminists associate with intersectionality. Despite her novel ideas though, most critics raise concerns about her inconsistencies, lack of methodology, and critical awareness. What I aim to do in this paper is to re-evaluate hooks and propose ways to address some of these supposed contradictions. To enrich hooks’ feminist theory, I propose three main points: the emphasis on the crossing of borders, feminist solidarity and global transgression.

*Keywords:* bell hooks, Interlocking webs of oppression, Intersectionality, Post-feminism, Revolutionary feminism

### Introduction

In 1984, bell hooks or Gloria Jean Watkins, published a groundbreaking critique of the existing feminist discourses during her time. She observed that while feminist theorists were writing on being oppressed by virtue of their sex or by simply being women, and while the feminist movements were fighting for rights that only men had access to, these same feminists neglected the plight of other women themselves. While feminists stress the importance of including *other* groups in philosophizing and theorizing, they seem to have deliberately neglected non-white, unprivileged women. In *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, hooks proposes a new definition of feminism, one that does not simply fight for the equality of women and men (of the same class) but of a movement that fights to end sexist oppression and exploitation without neglecting other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, imperialism and others. Each of these forms of oppression are interrelated and inseparably connected to each other through interlocking webs of oppression (hooks 1984, 31).

Through the interrelatedness of various oppressions, hooks proposes a framework for evaluating culture, which starts off with the black working class experience and invites everyone to examine common representations and images through interrogation techniques such as oppositional gazing (hooks 1992,122) and border-crossing (hooks 2006, 6). These representations are accordingly motivated, and they reinforce systems of domination. Through her process of

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interrogation, hooks hopes to spread critical awareness, develop enlightened witnesses (hooks 1997, 8), and eventually transform culture.

Her notion of interlocking webs of oppression is connected to “intersectionality”, an important conceptualization in today’s feminist circles. When one refers to himself or herself as a feminist, he or she must not neglect discussing intersectionality. As is well-known, Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the word “intersectionality” in connection to feminism in 1989. She stresses the multidimensionality of the black experience, the *intersectionality* of race and sex that both play roles in the systems of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989, 139). In an interview in 2014, she mentioned that intersectionality is not new, but it is still imperative to talk about it. In the United States, for example, women of color are still invisible, discriminated and marginalized by virtue of them being women and people of color.

Assertions that hooks makes on feminism and culture are still quite relevant today. Given the revival of intersectionality, emergence of the fourth wave of feminism and developments in global feminism, one should explore how hooks’ fares alongside contemporary postfeminists. Most of the criticisms of hooks centers on attacks against her person: she does not practice what she preaches and that she is narcissistic (Schweizer 2005, 9). Furthermore, hooks has also been accused of being unscholarly, sloppy and self-righteous in her writing (Franklin 2009, 201-202). The core of her work can be surmised as a commentary on how to resist motivated representations (hooks 1997, 4) and eradicate the interlocking webs of oppression (hooks 1984, 5). As ratification and engagement in supportive criticism, what I intend to do in this paper is interrupt, question, and rethink hooks’ feminist theory (Ahmed 2004, 17), what are some of the contradictions and how her work can be understood in parts or as a whole and how it can be extended further in relation to the contemporary context and in feminism’s turn to culture.

## **bell hooks’ Feminist Theory**

### *Revolutionary Feminism*

When hooks started writing her own feminist theory in 1984, various feminists have been debating about the definition of feminism and what it meant to be part of the feminist movement. There was a question of what feminists fought for and ought to fight for. Contrasting interpretations of feminist theory sprung left and right, paving the way for a new brand of confusion in the movement (hooks 2000, 6). Misconceptions were prevalent, particularly, that feminism is all about women wanting to become men. At the same time, feminist women were believed to be man-haters who were always angry and vengeful, their primary goal (sic) to eradicate men from the face of the earth! Bewilderingly, “real” feminists supposedly hate men but also wanted to be men (hooks 2000, viii). Making this problem the core of her earlier writings, hooks stated that without a well-grounded definition, feminism will lose what it stood for. She writes:

(The) central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definition(s) that could serve as points of unification. Without agreed upon definition(s), we lack a sound foundation on which to construct theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis (hooks 1984, 17).

Without a unifying definition, hooks feared that feminist politics would be ignored altogether and disinterest in feminism would continue or grow. At this point, she made it her main

aim to define feminism, which eventually would pave the way for a more relevant *Revolutionary Feminism*.

In the 1980s, feminism, then also known as “women’s lib”, was simply known in popular culture (although not among feminist scholars) as the movement fighting for equal rights between men and women. This was problematic on that level, since it gave rise to the following questions such as: “which men do women want to be equal to?” and “do women share a common vision of what equality means?” (hooks 1984, 18). She wanted to develop a definition of feminism that was all-encompassing, without neglecting the “other” members of society. Being a black woman living in a white man’s world, feminism went beyond the plight of those oppressed by their sexualities. Diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and many other factors also play vital roles in the exploitation or discrimination of individuals. Writing on the more well-known definition of feminism as the fight for equality between men and women, hooks states,

...implicit in this simplistic definition of women’s liberation is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited or oppressed 1984, 18).

For hooks, the well-known definition of feminism only privileges white Bourgeois women. These women were contented with such a definition since they did not see the importance of calling to attention their race and class privileges since their races and classes were privileged. Feminism should include more than just the plight of white Bourgeois women; it should include all those who are exploited, discriminated and/or oppressed.

Feminism started off as a movement to end sexist oppression, but it would be better defined as “the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000, viii). This definition “...clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-male. It makes clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (hooks 2000, viii).

Furthermore, this definition makes it clear that if there are oppressed people, there are oppressors as well. Considerably, “females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be wrong-minded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men” (hooks 2000, ix).

Her definition of feminism takes off from her critique of Betty Friedan’s seminal work, *The feminine mystique*. Friedan claims that housewifery makes it “...almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or “I” without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive” (1984, 2).

Claiming that the outdated definition of feminism as limiting, she asserts that Friedan fails to take into consideration the plight of women from other classes or races--for instance, the plight of American black women. As “college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women--housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products” started wanting more out of life--in this particular case, wanting to work outside of the home and build careers, Friedan fails to acknowledge the women who are called to “. . . take care of the children and maintain the home” while “women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions” (hooks 1984, 1). While Friedan speaks of the white Bourgeois married women’s desire to break away from the chains of household labor, she

“did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women” (hooks 1984, 1-2).

She further claims that Friedan’s theory is discriminatory as it makes the white Bourgeois woman’s plight the center of feminist discourse. She also questions whether the feminist experience of white women is an adequate perspective on women’s collective realities (hooks 1984, 3). Limiting feminist theory to the discourse on gender cannot be a solid foundation for theorizing.

Feminist theory must be revamped to include more than just the plight of privileged women. Marginalized women, or women of other races or classes should make use of their “special vantage points” and take a look at “the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (hooks 1984, 15). The participation in this brand of feminist theory is everyone’s responsibility. As hooks’ book title suggests, *Feminism is for everybody* (2000).

Friedan’s type of feminist theory is labelled as contemporary liberal or reformist feminism.<sup>2</sup> Such a feminist theory is primarily concerned with promoting social equality between women and men of the same class, which in this case, pertains to the upper or middle classes.<sup>3</sup> Women who belong to this movement are content with just getting out of housewifery. It is a romanticized version of freedom of the self that fails to insinuate political action considering that merely describing one’s own womanly woes will not rid society of domination or oppression. Furthermore, such ideas will not rock the status quo, for getting out of the home is not so much of a threat to society (hooks 1984, 21-23). She proposes more than just a reform, she offers a revolution--a struggle.

Revolutionary feminism can make a difference. Through a necessary struggle and a fostering of a critical political consciousness, change is possible. As hooks writes,

The foundation of a future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact (1984, 31).

One must first start off though with the acceptance that everyone is guilty of perpetuating sexism. It “helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action”. The solution is to “replace it with feminist thought and action” (hooks 2000, viii-ix). This has nothing to do with equality between men and women but an acknowledgement of a mutual ethos. More than just ending sexism, revolutionary feminism seeks to end racism, class elitism and imperialism as well. In order to do this, there should be a global revolution of sustained freedom, justice and peace anchored on a human’s self-actualization.

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<sup>2</sup> Contemporary liberal or reformist feminism should not be confused with the liberal feminism of the first wave movement pioneered by Mary Wollstonecraft.

<sup>3</sup> Before hooks, reformist feminism was not used to refer to contemporary liberal feminism; hooks labeled the contemporary liberals as reformist to contrast it against radical feminism. Tom West (2004) clarifies the difference between the two from the viewpoint of political strategy: Reformist feminism is the movement towards the full equality of men and women should on most issues be gradual and incremental; radical Feminism, on the other hand, is the view that the reigning patriarchal culture is so oppressive of women and so entangled with other oppressive social structures that a radical break with current structures is required if women are to be fully equal.

While a liberal feminist focuses simply on a woman's self-freedom, revolutionary feminism proposes a more holistic actualization of the self that can eventually give birth to a global political restructuring. The self-development of a people will shake up the cultural basis of group oppression. Reformist thinkers chose to emphasize gender equality. Revolutionary thinkers go beyond altering the existing system so that women would have more rights. They want to transform the system and to put an end to patriarchy and sexism (hooks 2000, 4).

Revolutionary feminism goes beyond the reform of women's rights. It does not exclude women of color or of different classes or even men for that matter. Vision, not exclusion, is vital for a revolution--and this vision ensures that global politics is transformed to hopefully eradicate the dynamics of domination. One of the primary reasons hooks critiques the reformist notions because of its exclusion of colored women in the feminist discourse. She claims that,

If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the common discourse (hooks 1984, 11-12).

Similarly, black feminist writer Barbara Smith defines feminism as the following:

Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement (Smith 1979, 48).

Consequently, "feminism is not simply about women's issues but is a broad-based political movement that seeks freedom for all those who are oppressed" (Henry, Dicker & Piepmeier 2003, 8).

### *Interlocking Webs of Oppression*

The topic of women's oppression or oppression in general, has been debated on not only by feminist theorists but by philosophers as well. For example, feminist philosopher, Marilyn Frye defines "oppression" and looks at it by extracting the root of the word, which is "press". When one is "oppressed", one is "caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility" (Frye 1998, 46). To further illustrate the definition of oppression, Frye describes the experience of oppressed people:

...the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby-trapped (1998, 46).

To oppress a person is to render this person unable to make his or her own choices. According to hooks, "being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor" (1984, 5). All throughout modern feminist

thought, it has been claimed that, “all women are oppressed”. Allegedly, women all throughout the world share a common oppression by virtue of their inherited sex. On the other hand, the diversity of their classes and/or races ends the commonality. While the second wave, Bourgeois white women fight against sexist oppression--racist oppression and classism were generally ignored. Class, race, religion or sexual preference are not given that much importance in the study of women’s oppression (hooks 1984, 5).

She admits that sexism is the oldest form of oppression. Feminism, however, must not stop at trying to eradicate sexist oppression per se, as many other forms of oppression stem from sexist oppression. An example would be racist oppression. “Racism as well as class structure is perceived as stemming from sexism. Implicit in this line of analysis is the assumption that the eradication of sexism, the oldest oppression, is necessary before attention can be focused on racism or classism” (hooks 1984, 35). On the other hand, if one focuses too much on only one form of oppression such as sexist or racist, this would be a contradiction.

No one form of oppression deserves more attention than the other. Oppressions are multi-layered and they are embodied by sexism, racism, class elitism and imperialism. Consequently, all these are interrelated and inseparably connected to each other. The assumption that these factors can be separated from each other or that they have no impact on each other is wrongheaded and leads to “distorted, biased, and inaccurate” discussions on sexism and sexist oppression (hooks 1981, 12). As hooks suggests, individuals who fight for the eradication of sexism without supporting struggles to end racism or classism undermine their own efforts. Individuals who fight for the eradication of racism or classism while supporting sexist oppression are helping to maintain the cultural basis of all forms of group oppression. While they may initiate successful reforms, their efforts will not lead to revolutionary change.

Like oppression stemming from sexism and racism, hooks offers an account of oppression stemming from classism. In *Where we stand: class matters*, hooks states that in American society, at least, “it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand” (2000, 8). She claims people are scared to discuss class despite the obvious differences and conflicts between the rich and the poor since they will lose their class status once they show concern or affinity for the lower classes.

Talking of class might cause the middle class to lose their comfortable lives. However, “breaking the silence” about class is necessary to fight oppression caused by classism (hooks 2000, 8-10). She stresses, though, that class oppression is a hidden evil less readily discussed as sexism and racism.<sup>4</sup> While it has always been obvious that some folks have more money than other folks, class difference and classism are rarely overtly apparent, or they are not acknowledged when present. Racism and sexism were easier to identify and challenge than classism. The poor have no public voice in society. No wonder it has taken so long for many citizens to recognize class— to become class conscious (hooks 2000, 14). Class is defined by hooks as,

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<sup>4</sup> I first discussed the issue of class oppression in one of my classes this 2011. I was introducing to students the concept of interlocking oppressions, and I thought that it was another topic that would render a thousand yawns. Surprisingly, the students were listening attentively and taking me seriously. I was amazed with the questions and comments that my students had, with my primary conclusion that the subject was something new to them. It interested them, and I had the chance to awaken in them a consciousness that they could have been neglecting for the longest time. Class or race consciousness is not something readily discussed in Philippine society. Asking about the price of a certain gadget or fashion accessory was considered as taboo as it revealed a person's class status. Anyone who disclosed the amount of their credit card bill was either boastful or pitiful (due to mountains of debt), and this was an indication of class status.

...much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act (2009, 3).

The issue of class must first be confronted before females could unite together to fight patriarchy. Oppression by virtue of patriarchy can only be confronted if the issue of class is acknowledged. Accordingly, feminist liberation can only happen if class elitism is challenged.

All feminists should recognize the "reality of race and racism" (hooks 2000, 55). From the moment a girl is able to watch shows or films, she already finds out that black women are not always visible on screen -and a conclusion that can be made is that it is because these women are not white. All throughout hooks' cultural criticism studies, one will see the same critique of representations. She believes that all women in the United States know that "whiteness is a privileged category." The fact that white females may choose to repress or deny this knowledge does not mean they are ignorant, it may mean that they are in denial (hooks 2000, 55). If women would break free from this denial, the women's movement would be stronger. The realities of women's diversity would be exposed and "the feminist movement could face critique and challenge while still remaining wholeheartedly committed to a vision of justice, of liberation" (hooks 2000, 60).

Returning to the discussion of white supremacy, hooks claims that scholarship on women of color are biased. They attempt to show that "white girls are somehow more vulnerable to sexist conditioning than girls of color" (2000, 59). This assertion in itself can be attributed to white supremacist thinking, and she contends that the issue of race and racism be revisited by feminist thinkers. "Rarely do mainstream social critiques acknowledge this fact" (hooks 2000, 59). There is a need to further challenge the feminist movement--it should lay the foundation "for the building of a mass-based anti-racist feminist movement" (hooks 2000, 60). According to Ann Brooks, the interlocking oppressions theory would lead feminist theory to an "unsettled the normal certainties of this movement-oriented discipline and propelled it into its own distinctive sociology of knowledge (2003, 122)."

### **Interrupting hooks**

#### *A Multiplicity of Voices*

In a postfeminist era, it is vital that a theory bears a polysemy or multiple meanings. Feminist theorists should speak to more than just those in the ivory tower, and they should acknowledge the experiences of all human beings (not only women). The distinctness of human differences must be recognized. Her work speaks about the pain and suffering of all groups while being inspired by her love of and for black people. Accordingly, she speaks in a black voice but speaks to and for all people (Davidson & Yancy 2009, 6). The question, however, is whether hooks' theory include all the other "colors" aside from black? While she is concerned with the welfare of black people, how does her concern come into play within the global politics of oppression? Speaking of first world blackness may necessarily be problematic if presented to a third world brown woman who may have never experienced the first world contrast of black and white. Racism could also be experienced from other vantage points, not only the black vantage point.

However, hooks anticipates this question because she recommends “border-crossing”. This process supposedly invites cultural critics to use “new eyes”. Crossing the borders entails looking at the points-of-view of other races, classes and sexes. One joins the struggle as subjects and not objects. In this case, crossing borders demands that hooks herself transcend her blackness or poorness and enter into the discourse with a new set of eyes. However, she focuses more on the poor American black women’s sets of eyes, going as far as saying that “no other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (hooks 1981,7). This is hardly true as Native American women have suffered a similar historical erasure (Poupart 2003, 87). She may have failed to integrate the plight of *other* women who are not black. The question is, how does hooks invite one to use another set of eyes that are not first world, black, female, heterosexual and poor?

It is important to note that Western feminist thinking is distinct from third world feminism. Western societies were not subjected to colonial rule; thus, they tend to disregard the impact of imperialism in their struggles. More than empowerment or equality, women in the developing world, a significant percentage of whom are below the poverty line, may have difficulty attaining a certain level of consciousness considering the burden of an additional layer of oppression such as national oppression (Arnado 2011, 9). “Third World” oppression is an interlocking web of various oppressions structurally engineered within the phylogeny of national oppression. Perhaps this is one of reasons why hooks developed the concept of “white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy” in order to cover all grounds of oppression. She still fails, however, to enumerate Third World countries’ oppressed situations, which in itself contributes to the profundity of oppression in post-colonial societies.

A striking difference that should be pointed out is that the third world women’s experience of oppression is laden with poverty. This poverty is more difficult to circumvent given the lack of policies and infrastructure in these developing worlds. As can be seen in the Nations Online website ([https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/third\\_world.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/third_world.htm)), poverty, in this case, has three criteria: low-income estimate of gross national income, weak human assets and economic vulnerability. Furthermore, a country is not only categorized as “Third World” because of its poverty, other developing countries are categorized as such because of lack of political rights and civil liberties made available to its citizens, lesser gross national income or purchasing-power-parity, low human development, suppression of press freedom. These deficits in nationwide development reinforce oppressive systems.

Suffice to say, hooks may have also failed in recognizing other minority groups of women in the developing world who are further ensnared in this complex phylogeny. In the Philippines for example, it has been claimed that indigenous women who have migrated to the Baguio city are the most oppressed in their location considering their “gender, ethnicity, and migrant urban-poor status (Rafal 2011, 325).” While there are minority and other groups of women who suffer a more intricate, tangled web of oppressions, there are other nations that suffer a deeper national oppression as well. According to the World Population Review website (<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/fourth-world-countries/>), fourth World countries, are “countries in the Third world that are most stricken by poverty... (their citizens) are hunter-gatherers, live in nomadic communities, or are a part of tribes.” Interestingly, they may even reside in First World nations but have Third World living conditions. The Aboriginal women of Australia, for example, despite non-indigenous Australian women benefiting from progressive developments in feminism, are still denied their “human, civil, political, legal, and sexual rights (Fredericks 2010, 546).”

As for the oppressed who are not in Third or Fourth World nations, such as women in more developed Asian nations, the Western feminist lens has also ignored or reduced these women. Chinese feminists, for example, assert the necessity to identify the diversity and multiplicity of experiences of Chinese women and that the West must not reduce them to “one-ness” (Chen 2011, 22). On the other hand, Japanese feminists sought to verbalize the uniqueness of Japanese women’s oppression under an Emperor-patriarchal regime (Matsui 1990, 445).

Japanese feminist writer Machiko Matsui claims that “women in each society should build their own feminism based on the peculiarities of their culture, heritage, tradition, and socioeconomic conditions” (1990, 449). She acknowledges similarities with Third World women though and invites Japanese feminists to “develop a more comprehensive theory to articulate our shared cultural and historical peculiarities . . . in order to bridge the gap between women in advanced industrial societies and women in the Third World” (1990, 449).

Audre Lorde stresses that although differences should not be the cornerstone of feminist critique, there is a need to recognize and affirm them (1984, 115). The acknowledgement of the diversity of women and their representation must be adequate. The supposed conceit of Western theory must be challenged by forcing the integration of the marginalized and colonized (Genz & Brabon 2009, 121). The construction of gender goes beyond the experience of the Western, white, heterosexual woman (Genz & Brabon 2009, 28). One must not privilege one group over another while retaining the uniqueness of each of these varied groups (Sim 2001, 322). In short, there should be a feminist pluralistic perception that rejects a uniform or essential woman.

In her scholarship, hooks asserts she pluralistic through her notion of two types of voices: the multiple voice, which speaks to the marginalized and the radical voice, which speaks to the oppressors. The multiple voice speaks to both the oppressed and the oppressor wherein the oppressed is the main audience through an awareness of white capitalist supremacist patriarchy. The language used is the colonizer’s tongue and polyphony wherein nothing is supposedly lost in translation. The multiple voice’s goal is critical reflection. On the other hand, the radical voice zeroes in on the oppressed suffering, pain and deprivation while using vernacular language. Its main goal is resistance against oppressive forces. Crossing the borders entails experiencing the marginalized plight through new eyes through critical awareness.

Still, hooks fails to address the radical voice of the oppressed from developing nations and other women stuck in a more complex web of interlocking oppressions. While she stressed how the American white woman ignores the existence of colored and poor women, she again has ignored the plight of others as well. While using her radical voice, she even claims that women of the so-called “Third World” oppress black women as well, bringing the “same kind of contempt and disrespect for blackness” as white women (Shah 1990, 94). She even refers to them as “third world diva girls” (Hooks 1990, 102), saying that these divas they must respect women’s boundaries of experience (1990, 102). It appears she believes that Asian and Asian-American women are oppressed to a lesser degree than black American women. Yet it is quite clear that Asian American women, like African American women, undergo discrimination as well, perhaps of a different sort, but they are likewise mislabeled and excluded through racialized sexism and sexualized racism (Mukkamala and Suyemoto 2018, 32-46).

Controversially, hooks implies that black is a color that a woman would never wish on herself. There is a color caste system wherein people with lighter skin are preferred over those who have darker or *blacker* skin. Even biracial women, such as mulattos for example, occupy a more valued place in the hierarchy of race as opposed to “pure” black women. Apparently, the “closer” one is to whiteness, the more value she has. Blackness, however, is not merely physical aesthetic

color, it can also be code for the systems of domination in connection to the oppressor and the oppressed (Brah 2001, 432). Thus, “black” is a term that can be used to encompass all of the oppressed (whether from the First or Third worlds).

This concept of demoting blackness, however, may include others such as Asians for example, but this is limited to the political sense as cultural identity and meaning may be lost (Brah 2001, 433). Her reference to the black experience does not cover other women’s cultural backgrounds. Note that hooks gives much importance to a person’s “homeplace” and past as “the very meaning of home changes the experience of decolonization, of radicalization (1990, 148).”

The radical voice speaks only of African-American black women and it cannot speak for other women of color. Is hooks compartmentalizing oppression? Or, does she “formulate strategies for challenging all oppressions on the basis of an understanding of how they interconnect and articulate (Brah 2001, 444-445)?” As hooks writes,

Third world women never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status. . . (and) since no connections are made between first and third world power shifts, the assumption is reinforced that the third world just has not evolved to the extent that the West has” (2001, 316-317).

If, however, hooks does not find a connection between First and Third/Fourth World oppression of women, then she downgrades or simply ignores the plight of these other women (Carby 2001, 402).

### *Critical Self-Reflection*

Considering the importance of postfeminist interrogation, and hooks’ emphasis on critical intervention and vigilance, one should ask whether hooks interrogates her own blackness. Does she self-reflect on her works? In *Yearning*, hooks interviews herself via Gloria Watkins (hooks’ given name). This could have been an opportunity for Watkins to interrogate hooks. She did no interrogation, though, she simply did a recap of her feminist and cultural theories. She interrogates her fellow black people though like the time she questioned Ice Cube’s gangsta mentality and the divide it put between white and black folks (2006, 150).

One of the traps of feminist pluralism is that it fractures feminism’s own identity. If a subject is positioned as a black woman, the subject would underlie her claims for the cause of the group (Brooks 1997, 132). By asserting that such a group of black women exists (in this case, oppressed African-American, poor women), hooks does the same. Consequently, this type of politics valorizes separatism while denying respect for other groups (Brooks 1997, 133).<sup>5</sup>

### *Hearing Silent Voices*

There are two kinds of oppressed voices: 1) the silence of the oppressed who have never learned to speak and 2) the voice of those who have been forcefully silenced because they have dared to speak. Speaking is an act of resistance (this could be referred to as the radical voice) from ordinary talk. Ordinary talk has no political relevance unless it seeks to develop critical consciousness. Speaking of how we should celebrate coming to voice, hooks writes, “Third World

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<sup>5</sup> In hooks’ later works, she talks of expansionism, or an expansion of worldviews and ideas. She critiques separatism or exclusionism as a practice that strengthens the systems of domination (hooks 2006, 247). Fixed boundaries do not allow ideas to expand, therefore she proposes that human beings “grow”, a reintegration with a new set of rules: a balance between letting go and transgression and containing oneself and repression. She talks of the liminal space in between the binary structures, the space in between separatism and integration (2006, 248).

women, African-American women must work against speaking as Other, speaking to difference as it is constructed in the white-supremacist imagination (hooks 1989, 18).”

This is problematic as two questions can be raised: How can the marginalized transform silence into speech when the privileged speaks for them? And, how can hooks genuinely represent the voice of the oppressed when apparently subalterns cannot speak?

With regard to the first question, hooks talks of voices that are not the voice of the oppressors. This notion supports Spivak’s arguments that imperialists are merely fabricating the repression of women through counter-narratives (Spivak 2015, 95). Allowing oppressors to speak or interpret the voices of the oppressed is not in any way having a radical voice. The radical voice presupposes that the oppressed speak up and resist the oppressors’ practices of exploitation. In the case of *sati* or the old Indian practice of a widow sacrificing herself after her husband’s death--if the practice will free Hindu women from what they believe oppresses them (the cycle of rebirth), then they should speak against the British’ prohibition of such ritual. In theory, hooks should support talking back to the British.

However, since she is from “First World” America, where “sanctioned suicide” is considered a felony, this brings one to the next question. How can hooks be genuine in her talking about the oppressed when she, as a subject, speaks from her “privileged” point-of-view or a perspective that is not in the position of understanding other contexts?

Some scholars claim that hooks cannot represent the “common” black experience anymore since she is now in an academic pedestal (Wallace 1995, 8). It must be remembered, however, that hooks did have firsthand experience of being oppressed in a black neighborhood (Hooks 1981, 120). Her own voice, however, remains in question. Who can speak for race and who gave them the authority? Intellectuals tend to justify their positions when speaking for the race but fail to take into consideration other minority groups such as black lesbians or gays in the discourse (McBride 1998, 364). Naming oneself as a member of an oppressed group does not give one the authority to speak for the entire group (Brah 2000, 438).

The question that should be asked then is, what are the similarities or connections with oppressions that can lead to feminist solidarity? Is there a basis for a concerted, unified action against an oppressor? What is the basis of women’s solidarity? What unites women?

Hooks proposes that one should look at what a person desires. The commonality of feeling and the desire to end domination may unite all (hooks 2006, 257). Rather than looking at feminism through a purely postcolonial lens, which would render Western radical feminists’ work irrelevant to the rest of the world, hooks invites us to evaluate not where one comes from, but to where one desires to go. “Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth (hooks 2006, 33).” In this case, rather than criticizing hooks’ work because she mainly comes from a First World, black, poor background, we must review her feminism on the basis of where she seeks to take us. Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping interaction. Imagine living in a world where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility (hooks 2000, x). She puts forward a way to break barriers and renew feminist solidarity despite differences in women’s background and experiences. She invites more feminists to do collective work, critical dialogue. Valuing differences and complexities can lead to political solidarity (hooks 2006,110).

## Rethinking and Extending hooks

In defense of hooks, though, the multiple voices' awareness of white capitalist supremacist patriarchy itself interconnects the oppression of women from all fronts. It fails, however, to acknowledge the differences of women on an international scale. For example, although the multiple voice may speak for the oppressed woman in the Philippines or in the United States, it does not mine the web of intricacies involved between the two women from different locations. That is why it seems as if hooks writes mainly for the benefit of African American folks. Her many voices would gain from learning from transnational ideas and multiculturalism.

Some critics classify hooks as a postcolonial and/or a multicultural feminist. Both postcolonial and multicultural feminism highlight the shortcomings of reformist feminism. Postcolonial feminism, in particular, critiques Western reformist feminism's "failure to acknowledge and represent the diversity of women adequately (Genz & Brabon 2009, 121)." Postcolonial feminists "theorize by challenging western arrogance and ethnocentrism and incorporating the choices of marginalized peoples (Genz & Brabon 2009, 121)." Multicultural feminists, on the other hand, "examine how gender is constructed across a range of identity markers, beyond the limits of Western, white, heterosexual and middle-class female experience (Genz & Brabon 2009, 28)." The notion of multiculturalism is somewhat similar to hooks' concept of multiple voices wherein one must not privilege one group over another group. Consequently, the challenge of multiculturalism is to "retain the uniqueness of different traditions and yet simultaneously to create a new entity in which these traditions come together (Sim 2001,322)." Multicultural feminism "facilitates a broad based, pluralistic conception of feminism that rejects the ideas of a homogenous feminist monolith and an essential female self (Genz & Brabon 2009,28)." In short, both postcolonial and multicultural feminists recognize that there should be a pluralistic postfeminist

stance that goes beyond the assumptions of the white, middle class and heterosexual feminist or in hooks' case, the assumptions of a "First World", black, middle class feminist.

Learning from transnationalism, one can gather that transnational is the new international. Incidentally, transnational replaces "the older concept of the 'international' as the name for the play of ideas, identities and communities beyond the nation (Hall & Birchall 2006, 200)." Moreover, "the transnational opens up new conceptual and theoretical spaces for imagining solidarities, social formations and cultural practices (Hall & Birchall 2006, 200)." Theoretically, transnationalism cuts "across the always artificial boundaries of national belonging, while nevertheless maintaining the lived reality of cultural 'disjuncture and difference (Hall & Birchall 2006,201)." It is an academic practice that enjoins critics to consider the globe.

But hooks does not dismiss the globe at all. She invites us to examine global culture and participate in a cross-cultural exchange. Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., if 'we are to have peace on earth' that 'our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation.' Long before the term *multiculturalism* became fashionable, King encouraged us to "develop a world perspective (hooks 1994, 28)." She acknowledges that it is difficult to shift paradigms in doing cultural critiques. Accordingly, "the sharing of ideas and information does not always progress as quickly as it may in more homogenous settings (hooks 1994, 31)." Perhaps her penchant for focusing on the black woman's experience is due to its accessibility to her. Similarly, Hooks talks about how, in a multicultural and multiethnic setting, she "did not know how to cope effectively with so much 'difference' (1994, 41)." Nevertheless, "women need to cut across borders rather than fetishizing (sic.) them into a spectacle of difference which in the end disavows difference (Brooks 1997,133)."

The solution hooks proposes to end oppression is the fostering of a critical consciousness through a method of critical evaluation that starts off with an interrogation of sex, race and class factors through a paradigm shift. The critique proper then follows, wherein the images are analyzed as to whether they are portrayals that actually promote liberation or reinforce systems of domination. The process does not stop here, hooks invites one to make these critiques known through a person's own radical voice thereby influencing more people to be enlightened witnesses. This in turn can eventually transform culture into a less oppressive one. Her method must not stop here though, as it should also question the impact of these representations on the global politics of domination.

But hooks must not ignore the other members of the oppressed groups. Other factors of the diversity wheel must be taken into consideration as well. She limits her critique to these three primary factors: race, sex and class. Branching out to the other aspects can be beneficial--it can move the discourse away from the focus on race and move it closer to a more inclusive, postfeminist stance. Aside from indigenous women and women from Third/ Fourth World nations, one aspect of the diversity wheel that has been neglected by hooks would be the ability and disability of women. The disability, handicap, illness and disease of women add on to another layer of oppression. "Disabled women struggle with both the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied (Wendell 1989, 205)." As early as the 1980s, there has already been a call for a feminist theory of disability (Wendell 1989, 104) and this is something that hooks should also incorporate. The intersectionality of sexism, racism, and classism is made more complex by disability, physical or otherwise.

To reevaluate hooks and propose ways to address some of these supposed contradictions and to enrich hooks' feminist theory and to further extend her notion of freedom, I propose:

1. A clarification of the definition of blackness as collective experience of those who suffer, in order to include the experience of other oppressed groups. This goes the same for whiteness, as a supremacist, dominating mindset.
2. An emphasis on crossing the borders as blurring the boundaries between nations. This ensures that women from developing nations, other minority groups, and differently-abled women will not be othered in the quest for liberation.
3. An unambiguous process for self-interrogation and self-critique. Although an honest confrontation, dialogue and reciprocal interaction is mentioned, hooks should point out how this can be done by members of oppressors' groups. She herself mentions that this is a difficult process.
4. Prioritizing a continuous emphasis on feminist solidarity as the commonality of feeling. Focus should be not on women's differences but on the common feeling of being oppressed.
5. And finally, a broadening of her critique of representations that is not limited to traditional binary oppositions but a cultural criticism that covers most of the aspects of human diversity. Cultural criticism should not be limited to what one knows about one's race, sex or class--but a transgression of boundaries.

## Conclusion

My first critique of hooks is that her voice speaks only to the black experience in spite of her claim that she harnesses multiple voices and crosses borders. She nonetheless fails to include a cultural critique of non-black experience. Contradictions only arise, though, because the meaning of the word black is limited to skin color. In hooks' case, she refers to black as a collective experience of all of those who suffer, all those who are oppressed. This definition, however, does not include the cultural backgrounds and homeplace of the oppressed but the experience of being oppressed itself. Although hooks does not explicitly define or talk about other experiences, her definition itself of the main oppressing system encompasses diverse factors that may oppress women from different fronts.

Imperialist white capitalist supremacist patriarchy, although seemingly limited to the "white oppressor" is more of a mindset of supremacy rather than a physical white person who happens to be an oppressor. The oppressed experience, as hooks defines, conveys any form of exposure to colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, or elitism. She just happens to have a firsthand experience of "black" (as a skin color and American background) oppression.

The second critique of hooks is that she fails to draw a connection between women of varying backgrounds. A woman from a developed nation would make use of cultural criticism differently from a woman from a developing nation. Transnationalism and multiculturalism suggests a blurring of "artificial" boundaries that divide humans across nations. However, hooks agrees that races, tribes, classes, or even nations must be transcended. She agrees with multiculturalism's notion that global culture is necessarily examined alongside personal experiences. An awareness of the global setting is imperative. This allows human beings to grow. She admits though, that a shift in paradigm is not easily done but one must try.

The third critique is in connection to hooks' invitation to self-critique. Members of oppressors' groups should accordingly interrogate themselves and their work to counter-check if they are reinforcing dominating systems. Yet, how can hooks' ensure that these groups will indeed self-interrogate considering that they benefit from the existing system? She proposes a three-prong strategy which includes honest confrontation, dialogue and reciprocal interaction. In order to broaden interpretative frameworks, there must also be a self-critique.

Significantly, one of the issues raised against hooks is Spivak's concept of how the subaltern cannot speak. Spivak claims that when it comes to talking back, the oppressed is not really capable of speaking. Especially when it comes to the colonized, the colonizers always speak and interpret for them. Thus, hooks' concept of the radical voice is in question. However, the main argument of the radical voice presupposes that the colonized speak against the colonizers –and not to allow the colonizers to speak for them. Since the radical voice is about resistance, it enjoins subalterns to move from silence into speech. This raises the genuineness of hooks' speaking for the oppressed. Who should be allowed to represent or speak for certain groups? Who speaks for the race and on what authority? Given that there are indeed differences between those who speak for groups and members of the groups themselves, the question that should be asked rather is, how can one identify the similarities and connections with different kinds of oppressions? This leads to a politics of solidarity rather than separation. On the other hand, what is the basis of this solidarity? What would unite the oppressed? The commonality of feeling, the desire to end domination is a shared belief among those who experience subordination. Similarly, she calls for a critical dialogue within the marginal space.

Although hooks fails to explicitly define a method of critique, she consistently applies a process that 1) uses a pluralistic lens to recognize the absence of oppressed groups, 2) an inquiry

into how oppressed/oppressors' groups are represented, and finally, 3) an analysis of the impact of the images on certain groups. I conclude, therefore, with the following recommendations for scholars who wish to expand on hooks' theory: a clarification of her definition of blackness and whiteness, an emphasis on her theory of crossing borders and her self-interrogation process, a focus on feminist solidarity as a commonality of feeling, and a global transgression of boundaries in her critique of representations. In order to enrich hooks' call for a critical consciousness, she must make the shift from radical voice to a global voice, from self-interrogation to a mutual interaction, and from feminist diversity to feminist solidarity. Consequently, this may lead to a real form of critical awakening—an extension of her idea of freedom.

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