



# Book Review Symposium

## Symposium in Honor of bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. By bell hooks. New York: Routledge, [1984] 2015. 180 pp. \$136.00 (hardcover), \$23.96 (paperback).

### *Introduction: On Feminism and the Politics of Race*

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We have chosen to devote the final issue of this volume of *Politics & Gender* to reviews of scholarship that explores the intersection of gender and race, as that relationship is understood from a feminist perspective.

We begin with a symposium marking the 35th anniversary of the publication of bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. The charge to our generous contributors was this:

In the preface to her 1984 book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks wrote: “Although feminist theorists are aware of the need to develop ideas and analysis that encompass a larger number of experiences, that serve to unify rather than to polarize, such theory is complex and slow in formation” (xviii). Thirty-five years later, in the spirit of this quotation, we invite you to re-read a work that has inspired so many and to ask how,

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in light of the argument advanced there, we might think today about gender, feminist theory, and the politics of race.

Following the symposium, we offer reviews of five recent books that address this same theme. Together, they demonstrate the vitality of work now being done in this area, as well as the ongoing salience of bell hooks's admonition that any form of feminism that ignores the topic of race is unworthy of the name.

As a quick refresher for those who have not read hooks's 1984 book for some time or who have never learned from this significant intervention in feminist scholarship, we offer the following abbreviated overview:

The subtitle of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* anticipates the call to revolution that bell hooks expressly advances in the book's final chapter and whose goal is unequivocal: "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression" (1984, 26). This revolution's cardinal condition is a form of theoretically informed practice that derives its inspiration from the lived experience of those who have stood for too long on feminism's periphery. Feminism, to be specific, will prove unable to accomplish its end until critical analyses of race and class essentially inform its struggles. To imagine that one can abolish sexism without attending to the diverse forms of exploitation with which it is intertwined is to betray the cause.

For decades, hooks declares, privileged white liberal feminists have done exactly that: "White women who dominate feminist discourse . . . have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state" (1984, 4). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, for example, erroneously equates the experiences of "a select group of college-educated middle- and upper-class, married white women" (1) with those of all women and, on that basis, defines emancipation as the opportunity to escape domestic drudgery and so embark on a career. Friedan thus fails to understand that for poor women and women of color, the world of work is one of daily degradation, often exacerbated by sexist abuse, from which home has sometimes offered a refuge, however imperfect.

So, too, the preoccupation of liberal feminists with passage of the Equal Rights Amendment "diverted a great deal of money and human resources towards a reform effort that should have been a massive political campaign to build a feminist constituency" (hooks 1984, 160). Identifying freedom with atomistic individualism and equality with the chance to become

like men (or, more precisely, white bourgeois men), in the last analysis, this brand of feminism has left class and racial privilege unchallenged. Such self-promotion is still more galling when, as is too often the case, it is predicated on a stereotypical portrayal of women as patriarchy's passive victims. This representation masks the complicity of liberal feminists "in supporting and upholding imperialism . . . or other forms of domination" (127) and at the same occludes the demonstrations of strength that have enabled poor and women of color to persevere. Doing so, these false friends have concealed the forms of difference they must deny if they are to sustain their universalistic pretensions.

The practice of feminism, hooks insists, requires theory, but theory that is forever self-critical, provisional, and open to anticipating possibilities as yet unimagined. For too many years, however, the production of theory has been the "domain of the white intellectual" (hooks 1984, 32) and, as such, has assumed the form of "bourgeois ideology" (9). True feminist theory must seek to join all women (and men who are also malformed by capitalist, racist, and patriarchal networks of domination) on the basis of shared resistance to "sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (xii). This goal cannot be accomplished, however, unless and until feminist political theory absorbs into its vital center the standpoint of those whose vision is indispensable precisely because of its particularity: "Living as we did — on the edge — we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out" (xvii). Only the experience of being simultaneously "part of the whole but outside the main body" (xvii) explains why black women are now especially well equipped to "make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision a counter-hegemony" (16).

To seed this oppositional vision, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks offers a series of tentative explorations, none "intended as comprehensive analyses" (1984, xviii), on topics including but not limited to sisterhood, work, violence, parenting, education, sexual identity, and, of fundamental import, the nature of power. If the promise of emancipatory power is to be fulfilled, hooks urges, women must come to envisage themselves as "active political beings even when we are subordinate to men" (128). For example, "[w]e must insist that women" who choose "to denounce violence and domination and their ultimate expression, war," do so not because they are by nature pacific, but because they "are political thinkers making political decisions and choices" (129). The foremost political choice, hooks enjoins, is a

collective embrace of forms of power that are “creative and life-affirming” (85) and thereby refuse power’s equation with “hierarchical rule and coercive authority” (118). It is this untruth, hooks concludes, that furnishes “the foundation on which sexist ideology and other ideologies of group oppression are based” (118). To eradicate this lie, perhaps for the first time, we must learn how to exercise power in the service of fashioning a world to which all belong equally.

#### REFERENCE

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### ***Sisterhood Is Powerful, but Must It Be Political?***

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In recent years, and especially since the 2018 midterm elections, there has been renewed attention to the idea of feminist “sisterhood.” Panicked discussions about white women voting for Donald Trump in large numbers or toeing the conservative line animated popular and political discourse. For those who are versed in feminist history and the literature of women and politics, however, there is little surprise in the ideological outcomes of elections that break along racial and gender lines (see, e.g., Junn 2016) or the fraught history of notions of political “sisterhood” (Price 2018).

This is part of what was refreshing in rereading bell hooks’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: we had a tangible reminder that many of the land mines of contemporary feminist and U.S. politics have had a long history of analysis and critique. Indeed, bell hooks takes a razor-sharp edge in criticizing the idea of feminist sisterhood, at least as imagined in mid-twentieth-century activist and intellectual circles. For bourgeois white feminists, according to hooks, the idea of “support” among women and the promotion of a sense of shared victimization justified a call to sisterhood ([1984] 2015, 64). This call, however, rang hollow for working-class women and/or women of color. As hooks recounts, “It is terribly apparent that feminist movement so far has primarily served the class interests of