

ANNA MARIA VAN SCHURMAN CENTRUM

GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

oratie



**FEMINISM:  
THEORY AS LIBERATORY PRACTICE**

bell hooks

Belle van Zuylen Professor

May 15, 1992

Arts Faculty, University of Utrecht

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## Preface

The political, cultural and theoretical interventions of black women and women of color have been crucial to what is best in feminist scholarship in and outside academic settings. The insistence that without attention to race and ethnicity every theory of gender and sexual difference fails, has been fundamental for the development of women's studies.

The work of the Afro-American cultural critic bell hooks (the non-capitalized pen name of Gloria Watkins) is a major example of this vital influence. Since her first book "Ain't I a Woman?", Black Women and Feminism (1981) her contributions to the American debates on gender, race and class have been internationally acclaimed as political and intellectual challenges. Her commitment to writing and speaking with a style that is also accessible to non-academic audiences has enabled her to develop a body of work that brilliantly combines personal and academic insights, political and autobiographical arguments and practical and theoretical observations. It provided her with an audience far beyond the limits of academic feminism and thus it contributed to spreading feminist consciousness.

Bell hooks' visit to the University of Utrecht as the Belle van Zuylen Professor in the early summer of 1992 was a high point in international intellectual exchange that is of such fundamental importance to all academic pursuits. In addition, the visit of bell hooks to the Netherlands symbolized and reinforced another intellectual exchange that may be equally important for the development of feminist scholarship: the conversation between academic and non-academic feminists. During the time she spent as a guest of the Department of Women's Studies in the Arts, Professor bell hooks taught graduate and undergraduate classes, attended staff research seminars, and stimulated staff and students to think and to think again about the other occasions she discussed racism with Dutch women of color.

The Anna Maria van Schuurman Centrum, Graduate School for Advanced Research on women's Studies would like to thank the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht and especially the Arts Faculty for making this visit possible. Not many women have been in the position to give an inaugural address at a Dutch University. Much rarer have been the occasions when a woman of color was at the center of this old academic ritual of public scholarship. May the visit and the work of bell hooks contribute to a lasting change in this respect.

Utrecht, August 1992

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## FEMINISM: THEORY AS LIBERATORY PRACTICE

To journey through one's life committed to a feminist politics that informs every aspect of one's daily experience is an undertaking that requires courage, commitment, a willingness to risk, to challenge, to be open - so open that one can be turned around, transformed utterly by new and different epistemologies, ways of seeing, and knowing the world that shake familiar foundations. None of us would be able to go the distance were it not for daring visionary feminist critical thinkers, past and present, who charted the journey mapping alternative terrains, making paths that lead us away from domination. I have come a long way to celebrate with you that process. It is fundamentally a radical political process emerging from feminist resistance.

Years ago when I was in graduate school the burning questions for feminist thinkers centred around two crucial concerns. First, the place for feminist studies in the academy. Was our goal simply to create and maintain Women's Studies, making a safe place for those who wanted to do scholarly work from a feminist standpoint or were we hoping to change the academy, transforming it so that patriarchal biases would no longer shape the learning experience of any discipline? Secondly, we were passionately concerned with the question of race, wanting to understand the way it, together with gender, shaped and determined our destiny. We were struggling then, as now, to re-define and re-vision feminist theory and practice. We wanted to create feminist theory rooted in recognition of concrete reality, of our lived experience in the world. We wanted our intellectual work to be fundamentally a liberatory practice that would not only change our ways of thinking and habits of being but act to transform the world in ways that would bring peace, enable justice and end domination, particularly sexism and sexist oppression.

During those graduate years, I met a fellow student who was also journeying - seeking. I had come from a small town in the Southern part of the

United States. She had come all the way from the Netherlands. Working to realize our vision of feminist sisterhood and solidarity, we shared with one another our perspectives, our cultures, our longings. She would tell me about life here urging me to come one day and see. Far from home, we would both light a candle as a ritual of remembrance. Rituals of remembrance are necessary so that we do not forget who we are, where we have come from, what our struggle has been, and what we long for. It brings me joy to participate in this ritual today, a ritual where we remember the legacy of Belle van Zuylen, affirming feminist solidarity with women in the past and present. It brings me joy that this ritual reunites me with my Dutch graduate school comrade Marijke Snijders so that we can remember the way we were and bear witness to the way we are now - to how far we have come.

I would not be here were it not for the dedication and commitment of Berteke Waaldijk, who embodies those qualities of feminist solidarity that are the realization of a perfect union between feminist intellectual work and practice. She patiently wooed me because she believed that my presence at the University of Utrecht would make a meaningful intellectual intervention. Already engaged in passionate dialogues with powerful feminist thinkers here at the University of Utrecht, professors and students, I am daily convinced by this process of mutual exchange that I was meant to be here - sharing and learning with you at this time. I am especially enriched by the presence and work of Women's Studies chair Professor Rosi Braidotti; by teaching with Maaïke Meijer, by conversations about film and culture with Anneke Smelik and everyone in women's studies. I am grateful to Anthony, my companion, for joining me here. And to all of you who not only welcome us, but open your minds and hearts.

A few days before I came here, a young feminist scholar who lived and worked in the United States far from her European home committed suicide. She was both friend and comrade. I want to remember her presence here today. For her death reminded me that as progressive intellectuals we must be committed to

creating work that can sustain life. This is the contemporary challenge of feminist theory and practice.

Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

I came to theory young - when I was still a child. In 'The Significance of Theory' Terry Eagleton says:

*"Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural' and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently"*

Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo, I was punished. I remember trying to explain at a very young age to mama why I thought it was highly inappropriate for daddy, this man who hardly spoke to me, to have the right to discipline me, to punish me physically with whippings: her response was to suggest I was losing my mind and in need of more frequent punishment.

Imagine if you will this young black couple struggling first and foremost to realize the patriarchal norm (that is of the woman staying home, taking care of household and children while the man worked) even though such an arrangement meant that economically they would always be living with less. Try to imagine

what it must have been like for them, each of them working hard all day, struggling to maintain a family of seven children, then having to cope with one bright eyed child relentlessly questioning even daring to challenge male authority, rebelling against the very patriarchal norm they were trying so hard to institutionalize.

It must have seemed to them that some monster had appeared in their midst in the shape and body of a child - a demonic little figure who threatened to subvert and undermine all that they were seeking to build. No wonder then that their response was to repress, contain, punish. No wonder that mama would say to me, now and then, exasperated, frustrated: "I don't know where I got you from, but I sure wish I could give you back".

Imagine then if you will my childhood pain. I did not feel truly connected to these strange people, to these familial folks who could not only fail my grasp, my world view, but who just simply did not want to hear it. As a child, I didn't know where I had come from. And when I was not desperately seeking to belong to this family community, that never seemed to really accept or want me, I was desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging. I was desperately trying to find my way home. How I envied Dorothy her journey in The Wizard of Oz that she could travel to her worst fears and nightmares only to find at the end that 'there is no place like home'. Living in childhood without a sense of home, I found a place of sanctuary in 'theorizing', in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This lived experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller lets us know in her introduction to the book Prisoners of Childhood (later published as The Drama of the Gifted Child), that it

was her own personal struggle to recover from the wounds of childhood that led her to rethink and theorize a new prevailing social and critical thought about the meaning of childhood pain, of child abuse. In her adult life, through her practice, she experienced theory as a healing place. Significantly, she had to imagine herself in the space of childhood, to look again from that perspective, to remember 'crucial information, answers to questions which had gone unanswered throughout [her] study of philosophy and psychoanalysis'. When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two - that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other.

Theory is not inherently healing or revolutionary. It fulfils this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. When I was a child, I certainly did not describe the process of thought and critique I engaged in as "theorizing". Yet, as I suggested in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre, the possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; that concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term just as we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the word 'feminism'.

Often individuals who most employ certain terms freely, terms like theory or feminism are not necessarily practioners, whose habits of being and living most embody the action - the practice of theorizing or engagement in feminist struggle. Indeed, the privilege act of naming often affords in power access the modes of communication that enable them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work, actions etc. that may not be accurate -that may obscure what is really taking place. Katie King's essay "Producing Sex, Theory, and Culture: Gay/Straight Re-Mappings in Contemporary Feminism" (published in the collection of essays Conflicts in Feminism, is a very useful discussion of the way in which academic production of feminist theory formulated in hierarchical settings

often enables women, particularly white women, with high status, visibility, etc. to draw upon the work of feminist scholars who may have less or no status, less or no visibility, without giving recognition to these sources.

Discussing the way work is appropriated and/or the way readers will often attribute ideas to a well known scholar/feminist thinker even if that individual has cited in her work that she is building on ideas gleaned from less well known sources. Focusing particularly on the work of Chicano theorist, Chela Sandoval, King states: "Sandoval has been published only sporadically and eccentrically, yet her circulating unpublished manuscript are much cited and often appropriated, even while the range of her influence is rarely understood." Though King risks positioning herself in a caretaker role as she rhetorically assumes the posture of feminist authority, determining the range and scope of Sandoval's influence, the critical point she works to emphasize is that the production of feminist theory is complex, that it is less the individual practice than we often think and usually emerges from engagement with collective sources. Echoing feminist theorists, especially women of colour who have worked consistently to resist the construction of restrictive critical boundaries within feminist thought, King encourages us to have an expansive perspective on the theorizing process.

Critical reflection on contemporary production of feminist theory makes it apparent that the shift from early conceptualizations of feminist theory which insisted that it was most vital when it encouraged and enabled feminist practice begins to occur or at least become most obvious with the segregation and institutionalization of the feminist theorizing process in the academy, with the privileging of written feminist thought/theory over oral narratives. Concurrently, the efforts of black women/women of colour to challenge and deconstruct the category "woman", the insistence on recognition that gender is not the sole factor determining constructions of femaleness was a critical intervention which led to a profound revolution in feminist thought, one that truly interrogated and disrupted the

hegemonic feminist theory produced primarily by academic women, most of whom were white.

In the wake of this disruption, this critical assault on white supremacy as it was made manifest in feminist critical practices alliances between women academics (specially, white women) and male peers (mainly white) seemed to have been formed and nurtured around common efforts to formulate and impose standards of critical evaluation that would be used to define what is theoretical and what is not. These standards often led to appropriation and/or devaluation of work that did not "fit", that was suddenly deemed not theoretical, or not theoretical enough. In some circles, there seems to be a direct connection between white feminist scholars turning towards critical work/theory by men (mainly white), and their turning away from fully respecting and valuing the critical insights, theoretical offering of black women/women of colour.

Work by women of colour and marginalized groups of white women (for example, lesbians, sex radicals), especially if written in a manner that rendered it accessible to a broad reading public, even if that work enables and promotes feminist practice, is often de-legitimized in academic settings. Let us remember that though such work is often appropriated by the very individuals setting restrictive critical standards, it is this work that they most often claim is not really theory or is not theoretical enough. Clearly, one of the uses these individuals make of theory is instrumental. They use it to set up unnecessary and competing hierarchies of thought which reinscribe politics of domination by designating some work inferior, superior, more or less worthy of attention. In her essay, King emphasizes that "theory finds different uses in different locations". It is evident that one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, containing obscure references that may not be at all clear or explained, etc. Literary critic, Mary Childers declares that it is highly ironic that "a certain kind of theoretical performance



which only a small cadre of people can possibly understand" has come to be seen as representative of any production of critical thought that will be given recognition within many academic circles as "theory". It is especially ironic when this is the case with feminist theory. And, it is easy to imagine different locations, spaces outside academic exchange where such theory would not only be seen as useless, but would be seen as politically nonprogressive, as a kind of narcissistic self indulgent practice that most seeks to create a gap between theory and practice so as to perpetuate class elitism. There are so many settings in a country where the written word has only slight visual meaning, where individuals who cannot read or write can find no use for published theory however lucid or opaque. Hence, any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate a mass public.

Imagine what a change has come about within feminist movement when students, most of whom are female, come to women's studies classes and read what they are told is feminist theory only to feel that what they are reading has no meaning, cannot be understood, or when understood in no way connects to lived realities beyond the classroom. As feminist activists we might ask ourselves of what use is feminist theory that assaults the fragile psyches of women struggling to throw off patriarchy's oppressive yoke. We might ask ourselves, of what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could easily be standing in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or is going to, who also subjects them to a process of interaction that humiliates, that strips them of their sense of value. Clearly, a feminist theory that can do this may function to legitimize women's studies and feminist scholarship in the eyes of the ruling patriarchy, but it undermines and subverts feminist movement. Perhaps, it is the existence of this most highly visible feminist theory that compels us to talk about the gap between theory and practice. For it is indeed the purpose of such theory to divide, separate, exclude, keep distance. And because this theory continues to be used to silence, censor and devalue various feminist

theoretical voices, we cannot simply ignore it. Concurrently, despite its uses as an instrument of domination, it may also contain important ideas, thoughts, visions, that could if used differently serve a healing, liberatory function. However, we cannot ignore the dangers it poses to feminist struggle that must be rooted in a theory that informs, shapes and makes feminist practice possible.

Within feminist circles, many women have responded to hegemonic feminist theory that does not speak clearly to us by trashing theory, and as a consequence, further promoting the false dichotomy between theory and practice. Hence, they collude with those whom they would oppose. By internalizing the false assumption that theory is not a social practice, they promote the formation within feminist circles of a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is viewed as more important than any theory written or spoken. Recently, I went to a gathering of women, predominantly black, where we discussed whether or not black male leaders, like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, should be subjected to feminist critiques that pose hard questions about their stance on gender issues. The entire discussion was less than two hours. As it drew to a close, a black woman present who had been particularly silent, spoke to say that she was not interested in all this theory and rhetoric, all this talk, that she was more interested in action, in doing something, that she was just 'tired' of all the talk.

Her response disturbed me: it was a familiar reaction. Perhaps she inhabits in her daily life a different world from mine. In the world I live in daily, the occasions where black women/women of colour thinkers come together to rigorously debate issues of race, gender, class and sexuality are rare. Therefore, I did not know where she was coming from when she suggested that talk, like the discussion we were having was common, so common, as to be something we could dispense with or do without. I felt that we were engaged in a process of critical dialogue and theorizing that has long been taboo. Hence, from my perspective, we were charting new journeys claiming for ourselves as black women an intellectual terrain where we could begin the collective construction of feminist theory.

In many black settings, I have witnessed the dismissal of intellectuals, the putting down of theory, and remained silent. I have come to see that silence as an act of complicity, one that helps perpetuate the idea that we can engage in revolutionary black liberation and/or feminist struggle without theory. Like many insurgent black intellectuals, whose intellectual work and teaching is often done in predominantly white settings, I am often so pleased to be engaged with a collective group of black folks that I do not want to make waves or make myself an outsider by disagreeing with the group. In such settings, when the work of intellectuals is devalued, I have in the past rarely contested prevailing assumptions or spoken affirmatively about intellectual process. Afraid that if I took a stance that would insist on the importance of intellectual work, particularly theorizing or if I just simply stated that I thought it was important to read widely I would risk being seen as uppity as lording it over, I have often remained silent.

Risking these blows to sense of self now seem trite when considered in relation to the crisis we are facing as African Americans, to our desperate need to rekindle and sustain the flame of black liberation struggle. At the gathering I mentioned, I dared to speak, saying in response to the suggestion that we were just wasting our time talking, that I saw our words as an action, that our collective struggle to discuss issues of gender and blackness without censorship was a subversive practice. Urging us to consider that many of the issues that we continue to confront as black people - low self-esteem, intensified nihilism and despair, repressed rage and violence that destroys our physical and psychological well-being cannot be addressed by survival strategies that have worked in the past. Insisting to the group that we need new theories that can move us towards revolutionary struggle rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance struggle that would transform our current reality, I was however not rigorous and relentless in my efforts to emphasize the importance of intellectual work, the production of theory as a social practice that can be liberatory as I would have

been in a different setting. Though not afraid to speak, I did not want to be seen as the one who "spoiled" the good time, the collective sense of sweet solidarity in blackness. This fear reminded me of what it was like more than ten years ago to be in feminist settings, posing questions about theory and practice, particularly about issues of race and racism that were seen as potentially disruptive of sisterhood and solidarity.

It seemed ironic that at a gathering called to honour a black male leader who had often dared to speak and act resistance to the status quo, black women were still negating our right to engage in oppositional political dialogue and debate especially since this is not a common occurrence in black communities. Why did black women there feel the need to police one another, to deny one another a space within blackness where we could unselfconsciously talk theory. Why when we could celebrate together the power of a black male critical thinker who dared to stand apart was there this eagerness to repress any viewpoint that would suggest we might collectively learn from the ideas and visions of insurgent black female intellectuals/theorists who by the nature of the work we do are necessarily breaking with that stereotype that would have us believe that the "real" black woman is always the one who speaks from the gut, who righteously praises the concrete over the abstract, the material over the theoretical.

Again and again, black women find our efforts to speak, to break silence that would enable us to engage in radical progressive political debates on a number of fronts opposed. There is a link between the silencing we experience, the censoring, the anti-intellectualism in predominantly black settings that are supposedly supportive (like all-black woman space), and that silencing that takes place in institutions wherein black women/women of colour are told that we cannot be fully heard or listened to because our work is not theoretical enough. In the interview published as "Travelling Theory: The Cultural Politics of Race and Representation", cultural critic Kobena Mercer reminds us that "blackness is ... complex and multifaceted" that "black people can be interpolated into reactionary and anti-

democratic politics". Just as some elite academics construct theories of "blackness" in a way that makes it a critical terrain only the chosen few can enter using theoretical work on race to assert their authority over black experience, denying democratic access to the process of theory making, threaten collective black liberation struggle, so do those among us who react to this by promoting anti-intellectualism by declaring all theory as worthless. For by reinforcing the idea that there is a split between theory and practice or by creating such a split, both groups deny the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression.

Recently I was reminded of this dangerous anti-intellectualism when I agreed to appear on a radio show with a group of black women and men to discuss Sherazade Ali's The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman. Speaker after speaker expressed contempt for intellectual work and spoke against any call for the production of theory. One black woman was vehement in her insistence that "we don't need no theory". Yet, Ali's book though written in plain language, in a style that makes use of engaging black vernacular speech, has a theoretical foundation. It is rooted in theories of patriarchy (for example, the sexist, essentialist belief that male domination of females is "natural"), that misogyny and woman hating is the only possible response black men can have to any attempt by black women to be fully self-actualized. Many black nationalists will eagerly embrace critical theory and thought as a necessary weapon in the struggle against white supremacy and suddenly lose the insight that theory is important when it comes to questions of gender, of analyzing sexism and sexist oppression in the particular and specific ways it is manifest in black experience. The discussion of Ali's book is one on many possible examples illustrating the way contempt and disregard for theory undermines collective struggle to resist oppression and exploitation.

Within revolutionary feminist movement, within revolutionary black liberation struggle, we must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic

framework of liberatory activism. We must do more than call attention to ways theory is misused. We must do more than critique the conservative and at times reactionary uses some academic women make of feminist theory. We must actively work to call attention to the importance of creating a theory that can advance renewed feminist movement, particularly highlighting that theory which seeks to further feminist opposition to sexism, sexist oppression. Doing this, we necessarily celebrate and value theory that can be and is shared in oral as well as written narrative.

Reflecting on my own work in feminist theory, I find that writing - that theoretical talk - to be most meaningful which invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism. To me this theory emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences to critically intervene in my life and the lives of others that make feminist transformation possible. Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory, because when this is the foundation of our theory there is no question of a gap between theory and practice. When we work to resolve those issues that are most pressing in daily life (our need for literacy, for an end to violence against women and children, women's health and reproductive rights, pure need for housing, for sexual freedom, to name a few), we engage in a critical process of theorizing that enables and empowers. I continue to be amazed that there is so much feminist writing produced and yet so little feminist theory that strives to speak to women, men and children about ways we might transform our lives via a conversion to feminist politics, to feminist practice. Where can we find a body of feminist theory that is directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life? For example, what feminist theory is directed toward assisting women who live in sexist households in their efforts to bring about feminist change?

We know that many individuals have used feminist thinking to educate themselves in ways that allow them to transform their lives. I am often critical of

a lifestyle based feminism, because I fear that any feminist transformational process that is not rooted in a political commitment to mass based feminist movement that seeks to change society is easily co-opted. Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, we have already witnessed the co-modification of feminist thinking (just as we experience the co-modification of blackness), in ways that make it seem as though one can partake of the "good" these movements produce without any commitment to transformative politics and practice. In this capitalist culture, feminism and feminist theory is fast becoming a commodity that only the privileged can afford. It is fast becoming a luxury item. This process of co-modification is disrupted and subverted when feminist activists affirm our commitment to a politicized revolutionary feminist movement that has as its central agenda the transformation of society. From such a starting point, we automatically think of creating theory that speaks to the widest audience of people. I have written elsewhere and shared in numerous public talks and conversations that my decision about writing style, about whether to use conventional academic formats are political decisions motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach as many readers as possible in as many different locations. This decision has had consequences both positive and negative. Students at various academic institutions often complain that they cannot include my work on required reading lists for degree-oriented qualifying exams because their professors do not see it as "scholarly" enough. Any of us who create feminist theory, feminist writing, in academic settings in which we are continually evaluated know that work deemed "not scholarly" or "not theoretical" can result in one not receiving deserved recognition and reward.

Now in my life these negative responses seem insignificant to me when compared to the over whelming positive responses to my work both in and outside the academy. Recently, I have received a spate of letters from incarcerated black men who read my work and want to share that they are working to unlearn sexism. In one letter, the writer affectionately boasted that he had made my name a "household word around that prison". These men talk about solitary critical reflection, about using this feminist work to understand the implications of

patriarchy force shaping their identities, their ideas of manhood. After receiving a powerful critical response by one of these black men to my new book Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, I closed my eyes visualizing that work being read, studied, talked about in prison settings. Since the location that has most spoken back to me critically about the study of my work is usually an academic one, I share this with you not to brag or be immodest, but to testify, to let you know from first hand experience that all our feminist theory which is directed at transforming consciousness, that truly wants to speak with diverse audiences, works - that this is not a naive fantasy. In more recent talks, I have spoken about how "blessed" I feel to have my work affirmed in this way, to be among those feminist theorists creating work that acts as a catalyst for social change, that crosses false boundaries. There were many times early on when my work was subjected to forms of dismissal and devaluation that created within me a profound despair. I think such despair has been felt by every black woman/woman of colour thinker/theorist whose work is oppositional and moves against the grain. Certainly Michelle Wallace has written poignantly in her introduction on to the re-issue of Black Macho and the Mythe of the Superwoman that she was devastated and for a time silenced by the negative critical responses to her early work.

I am grateful that I can stand here and testify that if we hold fast to our beliefs that feminist thinking must be shared with everyone whether through talking or writing and create theory with this agenda in mind we can advance a feminist movement that folks will long, yes yearn, to be a part of. I share feminist thinking and practice wherever I am. When asked to talk in university settings, I search out other settings or respond to those who search me out so that I can give the riches of feminist thinking that I hold to anyone. Sometimes settings emerge spontaneously. Last month I was at a black owned restaurant in the South and sat for hours with a diverse group of black women and men from various class backgrounds discussing issues of race, gender, and class. Some of us were college educated others were not. We had a heated discussion of abortion, discussing whether black women should have the right to choose. Several of the Afrocentric

black men present were arguing that the male should have as much choice as the female. One of the feminist black women present, a director of a health clinic for women spoke eloquently and convincingly about a woman's right to choose. During this heated discussion one of the black women present who had been silent for along time, who hesitated before she entered the conversation because she was unsure about whether or not she could convey the complexity of her thought in black vernacular speech (in such a way that we, the listeners would hear and understand and not make fun of her words) came to voice. As I was leaving this sister came up to me and grasped both my hands tightly, firmly and thanked me for the discussion. She prefaced her words of gratitude by sharing that the conversation had not only enabled her to give voice to feelings and ideas she had always "kept" to herself but by saying it had created a space for her and her partner to change thought and action. She stared at me directly, intently, eye to eye, as we stood facing one another, holding hands and said again and again "there's been so much hurt in me". Testifying that she could feel the hurt going away, that she could feel a healing taking place within, she gave thanks to our meeting: our theorizing of race, gender and sexuality that afternoon had eased her pain. Holding my hands, standing body to body, eye to eye, she allowed me to empathically share the warmth of that healing. She wanted me to bear witness, to hear again both the naming of her pain and the power that emerged when she felt the hurt go away.

It is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorizing. Patricia Williams in her essay "On Being the Object of Property" argues that even those of us who are "aware" are made to feel that pain, a pain that all forms of domination (homophobia, class exploitation, racism, sexism, imperialism) engenders. Sharing from her experience Patricia Williams says:

*"There are moments in my live when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't*

*remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best. These are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and am surprised to see a whole person looking back .... I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole..."*

It is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location.

I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. Their work is liberatory. It not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active inclusive feminist struggle. We have still to collectively make feminist revolution. I am grateful that we are collectively searching as feminist thinkers/theorists for ways to make this movement happen. Our search leads us back where it all began to that moment when an individual woman or child, who may have thought she was all alone, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience. Let us imagine that this child or woman was suffering the pain of sexism and sexist oppression, that she wanted to make the hurt go away.

I am grateful that I can be a witness, testifying that we can create a feminist theory, a feminist practice, a revolutionary feminist movement that can speak directly to the pain that is within folks, and offer them healing words, healing strategies, healing theory. There is no one among us who has not felt the pain of sexism and sexism oppression, the anguish that male domination can create in daily life, the profound unrelenting misery and sorrow. Mari Matsuda has told us that "we are fed a lie that there is no pain in war". She told us that patriarchy makes this pain possible. Catherine McKinnon reminded us that "we know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized". Making this theory is the challenge before us. For in its production lies

the hope of our liberation in its production lies the possibility of naming all our pain of making all our hurt go away. If we create feminist theory, feminist movement, that addresses this pain we will have no difficulty building a mass based feminist resistance struggle - there will be no gap between feminist theory and feminist practice.

bell hooks.

## PUBLICATIONS BY BELL HOOKS

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