



Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center

bell hooks

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A sweeping examination of the core issues of sexual politics, bell hooks' new book Feminist Theory: from margin to center argues that the contemporary feminist movement must establish a new direction for the 1980s. Continuing the debates surrounding her controversial first book, *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks suggests that feminists have not succeeded in creating a mass movement against sexist oppression because the very foundation of women's liberation has, until now, not accounted for the complexity and diversity of female experience. In order to fulfill its revolutionary potential, feminist theory must begin by consciously transforming its own definition to encompass the lives and ideas of women on the margin. Hooks' work is a challenge to the women's movement and will have profound impact on all whose lives have been touched by feminism and its insights.

Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center Details

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Author : bell hooks

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Carlota says

essencial

James says

Originally written in the 1980s, hooks gives a pretty solid critique of the white privilege at the center of the early feminist movement, and goes on to discuss the diversity of women's experience, dynamics of power, male allies and the problem of patriarchy. This is intersectionality before intersectionality was cool. Bell hooks is a total feminist rock star.

Hira says

Incredible book. Examines the issues around women liberation through the lens of race, class, and gender, and shows in amazing detail how ignoring just one of these would diminish the possibilities of the entire movement. One thing that I am absolutely reveling in is the way bell hooks advocates for wholeness, how it's not men who are the enemy but the whole capitalistic ethos that puts aggressive competition as its ultimate ideal. How even women can be oppressors, in family, at work, and on various other levels if they are immersed deep enough in such an ideology. The need to see 'the entire picture' seems to be her theme throughout and this emphasis on inclusion, as opposed to division, is very stimulating to read.

Basically I am in love with bell hooks right now and the beautifully cogent way she puts forward her arguments in this book. There is no academic jargon, or things that make reading such texts an excruciating process, nor could I detect any dumbing down. Reading it, and processing the arguments it makes, it feels like I can be whole again. With an understanding of my own oppressive circumstances. And the oppressive hierarchies I myself am involved in perpetuating. Still have 60 pages to go, this book might just change my life.

Genelle Denzin says

This book really helped me see the complex relationship between sexism and racism. And my place as not only someone who suffers oppression as a woman, but also as a white woman, someone who benefits from the racist oppression of others and therefore causes suffering in others.

Christy says

Reading this book immediately following hooks' first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*

reveals how much a writer and theorist can develop in just a few years. Where *Ain't I a Woman* suffered because of underdeveloped points and undertheorized intersections of class with race and gender, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* shines. Hooks here works to re-define feminism in a way that opens up the movement to women and men of all race and class backgrounds and allows feminism to work for more than the bourgeois white women who had previously been perceived as the face of the movement.

In developing this stance, hooks takes on several key myths about feminism and about gender, including the idea that women are naturally superior, more caring, and more nurturing than men. She argues that this idea is counterproductive and simply untrue, stating instead that "[w]e who are concerned about feminism and militarism must insist that women (even those who are bearers of children) are not inherently non-violent or life-affirming. Many women who mother (either as single parents or in camaraderie with husbands) have taught male children to see fighting and other forms of violent aggression as acceptable modes of communication, modes that are valued more than loving or caring interaction" (128).

Further, since these gender roles are not fully cemented by nature, she calls into question the glorification of motherhood as well, providing two distinct alternatives. Rather than denigrating motherhood (the easy alternative for some to glorifying it), she proposes that we do not praise motherhood as the only true way to parent children. Instead, she says, we should teach men "ideally from childhood on, that fatherhood has the same meaning and significance as motherhood" (137). She continues, saying, "Women and men must define the work of fathering and mothering in the same way if males and females are to accept equal responsibility in parenting" (137). She goes beyond the nuclear family structure, however, to consider the benefits of communal parenting, for both the children, the parents, and the rest of the community involved in raising the children.

As interesting as I find these points, they are not the the most compelling part of this book. For me, that is found in hooks' two central points: the first is her clear distinction between identity politics and praxis and the second is her focus on struggle as a fundamental part of feminist political action. Hooks repeatedly insists that one's identity as a feminist is not at all the same thing as engaging in feminist action, writing that "[o]ften emphasis on identity and lifestyle is appealing because it creates a false sense that one is engaged in praxis" (28). To counter this false sense, she proposes a new way of conceiving one's position in the feminist movement that is based on action rather than identity:

"To emphasize that engagement with feminist struggle as political commitment we could avoid using the phrase 'I am a feminist' (a linguistic structure designed to refer to some personal aspect of identity and self-definition) and could state 'I advocate feminism'" (29).

While I see potential problems with this linguistic shift (although it does emphasize action instead of personal identity, it also risks feeling as if one is distancing oneself from the movement--I don't belong to it, but I support it), this is a fascinating idea that is worth considering.

Even more valuable than her suggestions regarding description and linguistic affiliation are her comments and suggestions regarding concrete action. One concrete action that she suggests is a focus on literacy. In order to make sure that feminist literature and ideas are able to reach those in need of them, the feminist movement must make sure that those people are able to read them. She advocates support of literacy programs as well as a reconsideration of the way that feminist theory is written:

"Many [feminist] theorists do not even intend their ideas to reach a mass public, and consequently we must take some responsibility for the superficial and perverted versions of feminist ideas that end up in the public imagination, via tv for example" (108).

This is an idea that I wish more feminist theorists would take to heart. Hooks goes on to acknowledge the pressures of the field and the publishing industry on academics who write feminist theory, but does not allow that acknowledgement to undermine her argument, writing that "[t]he ability to 'translate' ideas to an audience that varies in age, sex, ethnicity, degree of literacy is a skill feminist educators need to develop" (111).

Although I'd rather see all feminist theory written in a way that is understandable to more than a handful of experts, at the very least those ideas should be translatable to laypersons. If the ideas aren't translatable, perhaps they are not worth the effort; perhaps the effort would be better spent making a real difference in the real world. (On a more selfish note, I have to say that I can't help but think that if feminist theorists had taken up hooks' challenge, my feminist theory reading list would be a helluva lot easier to get through.)

Hooks' conclusion alone is worth the price of admission. She concludes by re-affirming the focus of feminism and establishing the necessity of struggle:

"Our emphasis must be on cultural transformation: destroying dualism, eradicating systems of domination. Our feminist revolution here can be aided by the example of liberation struggles led by oppressed peoples globally who resist formidable powers. The formation of an oppositional world view is necessary for feminist struggle. This means that the world we have most intimately known, the world in which we feel 'safe,' (even if such feelings are based on illusions) must be radically changed. Perhaps it is the knowledge that everyone must change, not just those we label enemies or oppressors, that has so far served to check our revolutionary impulses. Those revolutionary impulses must freely inform our theory and practice if feminist movement to end oppression is to progress, if we are to transform our present reality" (163).

This is a view of feminism that not everyone will agree with, but those who truly do want to see men and women of all races, classes, and ages able to be the best humans they can be will find this a satisfying vision of the world to work toward and a challenge worth taking up.

Bookshark says

Although this book presented a critical challenge to feminist orthodoxy at the time it was published, it has ironically become the contemporary feminist party line. There are some aspects of this book I find praiseworthy and other elements I find problematic, but regardless of which arguments fall in which categories, I think today's feminists would do well to take up hooks's call to continually re-evaluate whatever the hegemonic consensus of the day is.

On the positive side, hooks is excellent at identifying problems and courageous at putting forth potential solutions. She proposes concrete practices which align with her theoretical proclamations. Most importantly, she airs some of the perspectives which are common among poor or non-white women yet neglected by white bourgeois feminists. However, in her attempt to introduce these valuable perspectives, I think hooks ultimately reinforces the binary logic of domination she considers to be the root of oppression. By relying on a version of standpoint epistemology in which the most marginalized people have the greatest access to truth, hooks provides a rationale for the "oppression olympics" in which the "most victimized" status is coveted, even as she critiques the victim mentality within the feminist movement. The contrasts she sets up between white women and women of color sometimes ring false or just too strongly worded (for example, she states that black women are raised communally while white women are not), which seems to reinforce barriers between women rather than breaking them down. Furthermore, she seems to neglect other axes of oppression

beyond gender, race, and class. She does not talk at all about disability, immigration status, or trans/non-binary gender identity. Her discussion of LGB individuals is either in the service of making points about heterosexuality, trite, hetero-splaining, or non-existent (e.g. heterosexuality is not per se oppression any more than lesbianism is per se liberation, separatism is undesirable, lesbians should make sure there are men involved in their kids lives, etc). Lastly, she seems to be holding out for a utopian world in which there is no domination, which seems impossible if perhaps desirable as an ideal.

Despite my reservations, this book is definitely worth a read. It clarifies much of the logic behind contemporary feminist thinking, and reading it will help you understand where hooks's thinking has become hegemonic within the movement vs. where it has not gained such currency. It's also integral to the history of feminist theory.

Criss says

It took me a while, but I finally finished it. It took a while not because I didn't want to read it, but rather because it was so deep I wanted to read it when I could devote a hefty chunk of time to read it and process the info.

My copy has a bazillion pink and yellow tabs sticking out of it; all the spots I want to quote and blog about later. So many truths in that book... too bad about the author.

I have not researched this, but I heard it from someone whose intel I trust. bell hooks, while part of an oppressed group (Black women), was an active oppressor of another group of women even farther from the center than she: trans women. Oh, the irony of a woman writing about marginalized women and chastising those who marginalized those women because they didn't look like them, yet participating in the marginalization of women because they don't look like her.

The book is still a great read; the ideas are still true as long as one does in fact apply them to ALL women, not just cis women of color, as hooks apparently intended.

Patricia Highsmith's Snail says

I've made it a personal goal to read more feminist staples this year, as I feel that it's easy to think I understand everything from scanning Twitter. I haven't yet finished this but I wanted to get some thoughts down.

In 1984, this book was probably really revolutionary and exactly the intervention that feminist debate needed. bell hooks insisted that we can't have a coherent feminist movement if it's determined from the centre (i.e. by white bourgeois women). The perspective of WOC can make us see the way multiple oppressions interact – classism, racism, sexism – and in the process, make for a more cohesive, inclusive movement with a better thought-out agenda (as in, it's about class as much as it is about gender). It's weird to think that all that needed to be said, but I guess in the 1980s, some people (presumably white liberal women) thought the work had been done.

hooks argues that the idea of a common oppression based on gender served the purposes of bourgeois

feminists who needed more women in the movement but didn't want to address their race and class privileges. hooks notes, for example, the idea of the family as an oppressive unit alienated many WOC who experienced the family as the only institution within which they exercised power. Arguing that all men are oppressors was also alienating as WOC knew that racism made men of colour more likely to be oppressed than a white liberal woman.

The first thing I got from this was that bell hooks really made the case for arguing for a particular version of feminism. She really wasn't into the notion that 'multiple feminisms' can happily skip off together. While this doesn't make me any less averse to the bear-pit of social media debate, I do really understand now why arguing that one thing is more important than another is absolutely necessary. Sex workers rights (not bell hooks' example) are more important than getting a statue of a suffragette in central London for example, or a woman on a bank note.

I would love to know what she thinks of the 'me too' movement – there are a few times where she comments on how liberal feminism has delegated 'personal experience' talk to WOC, as a way of affirming what white feminists have, idk, researched or theorised using the correct platforms (in their view). She said WOC were being excluded from discussing and shaping theory. But actually, we've seen that talking about personal experience – a critical mass of it – can change things by changing the discourse (although WOC and white women have different experiences of how their accounts are received, for sure).

Anyway, more coherent thoughts later (perhaps).

Matt Sautman says

Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center is an intellectual powerhouse. In documenting the advent of feminist thought, hooks interrogates threads of classism, misandry, and racism that hooks identifies as undermining the overall feminist movement. In doing so, hooks extrapolates on how feminism is not a united front and that many "feminist" sects are just as problematic at the patriarchy they are trying to overthrow. In critiquing these sects, hooks advocates for a feminist movement that emulates Audre Lorde's argument in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." While feminism certainly has shifted somewhat since this book's initial publication, it remains relevant for anyone interested in black feminism, as well as feminism in general.

Roxanne says

This was a re-read for me as I prepare to teach part of it in a Gender Theory course. It falls under the books that if I could prescribe to every human being in this world, I would.

Elli (The Bibliophile) says

This was a great overview of bell hooks's views on various issues insofar as they relate to feminism. She addresses several different things, including race, violence, parenting and sex. Each chapter was pretty distinct and could be read as a separate essay, but I think the book is best read cover-to-cover.

If you are beginning to learn about feminism, this might not be the best place to start (go read Feminism is for Everybody, also by bell hooks) but I wouldn't say this is a difficult or dry read.

I really enjoyed reading this book and look forward to reading more by bell hooks, as well as owning my own copy!

Alex says

more bell hooks brilliance as usual. written in 84, this one criticizes the (white-dominated) feminist movement of the time, and provides another important stepping stone from the Second Wave to the Third Wave of Feminism.

also includes brilliant sections like this passage from page 121:

"Patriarchal male rule took on an entirely different character in the context of advanced capitalist society... As workers, most men in our culture (like working women) are controlled, dominated. Unlike working women, working men are fed daily a fantasy diet of male supremacy and power. In actuality, they have very little power, and they know it. Yet they do not rebel against the economic order or make revolution. They are socialized by ruling powers to accept their dehumanization and exploitation in the public world of work, and they are taught to expect that the private world, the world of home and intimate relationships, will restore to them their sense of power, which they equate with masculinity... By condoning and perpetuating male domination of women to prevent rebellion on the job, ruling male capitalists ensure that male violence will be expressed in the home and not in the work force."

Klelly says

"the shift in expression from 'i am a feminist' to 'i advocate feminism' could serve as a useful strategy for eliminating the focus on identity and lifestyle. It could serve as a way in which women who are concerned about feminism as well as other political movements could express their support while avoiding linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group. it would also encourage greater explorations in feminist theory."

"women will know that white feminist activists have begun to confront racism in a serious and revolutionary manner when they are not simply acknowledging racism in feminist movement or calling attention to personal prejudice, but are actively struggling to resist racist oppression in our society. Women will know they have made a political commitment to eliminating racism when they help change the direction of feminist movement, when they work to unlearn racist socialization prior to assuming positions of leadership or shaping theory or making contact with women of color so that they will not perpetuate and maintain racial oppression or unconsciously or consciously, abuse and hurt non-white women. These are the truly radical gestures that create a foundation for the experience of political solidarity between white women and women of color."

"We discovered that we had a greater feeling of unity when people focused truthfully on their own experiences without comparing them with those of others in a competitive way."

"women's legacy of women hating, which includes fierce, brutal, verbal tearing apart of one another, has to be eliminated if women are to make critiques and engage in disagreements and arguments that are constructive and caring, with the intention of enriching rather than diminishing. Woman to woman negative, aggressive behavior is not unlearned when all critical judgement is suspended. it is unlearned when women accept that we are different, that we will necessarily disagree, but that we can disagree and argue with one another without acting as if we are fighting for our lives, without feeling that we stand to lose all self-esteem by verbally trashing someone else. Verbal disagreements are often the setting where women can demonstrate their engagement with the win or lose competitiveness that is most often associated with male interactions, especially in the arena of sports. Rule suggests women can disagree without trashing if they realize they do not stand to lose value or self worth if they are criticized: "no one can discredit my life if it is in my own hands, and therefore i do not have to make anyone carry the false burden of my frightened hostility."

Annie says

This is a difficult book to read if you are a white feminist because it requires you to do one of three things.

- 1) Condemn bell hooks and stop reading (no, don't do this)
- 2) Rationalize: yes, bell hooks is right about this, but that's the other white feminists, that's not me. I am an ally. In fact, I am Saint Ally and nobody could ever say that I really fit into this stereotype of white feminists she is describing (slightly less bad, because it has more potential for growth, but don't do this either)
- 3) Admit to bell and to yourself that by doing things you thought were totally innocent, you have been fucking up and justifying it to yourself, and it is your job, not anybody else's, to alter your behavior and reprogram. Racism does not need to be conscious or intentional or thoughtful to be racism. Forgetting can be racism too. Not noticing, that can be racism.

I've never read Betty Friedan, but I was taken aback by hooks' intense criticism of her- she refers to her as "a case study of narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence" because she (Friedan) apparently draws comparisons between the effect of isolation on (implicitly, white) housewives and isolated prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.

Wait a minute, I found myself thinking indignantly. Drawing comparisons doesn't mean she's saying it's comparable! She's just saying it's... hold up... oh... yeah, no, I guess she is kind of saying they're comparable. Noticing how quickly I came to her defense was a good stage to set the rest of the book on. It was a good reminder to ease me into doing the work required of the subsequent pages.

So many important but subtle distinctions made here. The difference between oppression (absolute lack of choices- e.g. poor black women) versus discrimination or exploitation (e.g. middle-class white woman). The difference between a bourgeois white feminism that supports its own class interests and wants to make women more like men and "achieve equality" by erasing the feminine- affirming ever more the dominance

and desirability and rightness and centrality of the male, and radical feminism on the other.

There is just one thing I would disagree with in this book. That is the erasure of sexuality. hooks notes that while white women and black men are similarly able to both be oppressed and to oppress in different situations (white women can oppress POC, black men can exploit women), black women (esp poor) can only ever be the oppressed, there is no institutionalized inferior. I think this narrowing of the areas of institutionality to class, race, and gender alone is short-sighted, and does to the gay rights movement precisely what hooks argues white feminism has done to the struggle against racism: by ignoring it, it enforces it as socially invalid.

Plus, hooks thinks that the desire of some lesbians to use the term “feminism” to mean an alternative lifestyle, women-centered communities, is bad and alienates lesbian from the feminist movement, because they can have those kinds of woman-oriented communities “in churches, kitchens, etc.” But the thing is, they can’t. Lesbians often can’t find a community in churches- many religions do not welcome them, particularly the ones they were raised in/feel comfortable worshiping in. Many of their families likewise reject them. “Churches, kitchens, etc.” are not comfortable, fulfilling places for them.

Gems:

“By projecting onto black women a mythical power and strength, white women both promote a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims and deflect attention away from their aggressiveness, their power (however limited in a white supremacist, male-dominated state), their willingness to dominate and control others.”

“Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are ‘natural’ enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them.”

“Like women, men have been socialized to passively accept sexist ideology. While they need not blame themselves for accepting sexism, they must assume responsibility for eliminating it. Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it. This suffering should not be ignored. While it in no way diminishes the seriousness of male abuse and oppression of women, or negates male responsibility for exploitative actions, the pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change.”

“There is the perspective that men oppress women. And there is the perspective that people are people, and we are all hurt by rigid sex roles. Both perspectives are true. These two realities co-exist.”

“As long as a [a poor or working-class man] is attacking women, he is an enemy to women. He is also an enemy to himself. He is also oppressed. His abuse of women is not justifiable. He chooses to remain both oppressor and oppressed. If feminist movement ignores his predicament, dismisses his hurt, or writes him off as just another male enemy, then we are passively condoning his actions.”

Michael says

I just finished this book, and I found it challenging (in the sense that it challenges some generally accepted notions) and very thoughtful and well-written. She argues that mainstream feminism, which has been dominated by middle and upper-class white women, has not opened its doors adequately to non-white and working class women. She argues that part of the reason the movement has failed is because there has been an internalization of the sexist oppression paradigm by the leaders of the feminist movement (which manifests itself in the failure to recognize or address racism and classism in the movement). She says the movement definitely needs to be more democratic - rather than focus on advancing careers of white middle and upper class women, the focus needs to be on the poorer non-white women whose position in society has become worse/lower. She also argues that it's absolutely essential to find ways to involve progressive men to advocate for feminism with other men who benefit from the patriarchal hierarchy. As long as men are seen as "the enemy" it will be impossible for the movement to grow.

Christie Skipper Ritchotte says

bell hooks kicked open the door, and said that feminism was pretty much available in only one flavor, making it difficult, if not impossible, for women of other races and classes to join in. Feminism lacked diversity (barring lip service) because it didn't accommodate all women. It did not hear or see women whose lives did not mirror those of middle or upper class, college-educated Caucasian women.

Then she broke down the next door and declared that no one even knew what Feminism was. It's not being man-haters, not about lesbianism. It's not even about equal pay for women, although that is a positive change facilitated by the movement. The main message was lost, if it ever was clearly defined in the first place. Many who agree with the idea of the movement still won't admit to advocating feminism, because they don't know what it means. bell hooks (she adopted her grandmother's name as a pen name, using lowercase to differentiate herself) made this necessary point: If you don't define the thing, no one will want to be associated with it, nor will they feel compelled to try to understand it.

If Feminism means everything, then it means nothing, hooks said. Her definition: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression."

So Feminism has a definition, thanks to hooks, but it still has some heavy lifting to do. If feminists won't address and fight racism and class injustice for worry of getting sidetracked from movement goals, then it is the same as putting a Keep Out sign on the door. Exclusionary behavior narrows the thinking, putting people in a Lesser Evil state of mind, making it so much easier to gloss over the pain of other human beings and look the other way.

Today it seems as if feminism risks becoming assimilated by mainstream culture in its most generic, clone-like form. Sexism is as prevalent as ever, for both women and men. This book was written in the mid-eighties, but nearly thirty years later the issues she addressed remain.

Luckily, she is still writing books, delivering social commentary with a "snappy and bold tongue," like the grandmother whose name she cribbed.

Gabriela Ventura says

Terminei a leitura sonhando com uma forma de me dar esse livro de presente quando entrei para a faculdade. Teria sido uma revelação, porque talvez então eu tivesse conseguido elaborar toda a minha raiva (que era muito difusa) naquela época.

bel hooks mete a real: sem recorte de raça e classe o feminismo é só uma bandeira para mulheres bem nascidas - e se o foco não estiver na eliminação de injustiças sociais (para além das de gênero), a gente não vai sair do lugar. Eu conseguia no máximo intuir algumas das desvantagens que eu tinha em relação aos meus pares, mas imaginava que eram falhas minhas, incapaz de ver como a pobreza geracional da minha família e do lugar em que cresci influenciou minha vida. Embora hoje isso me pareça muito claro, eu não tinha como articular meu descompasso há 15 anos atrás, porque não me passava pela cabeça noções básicas de centro e margem.

Fred says

I used to think feminist theory was really important to study and learn about. And then John Mayer wrote a song that made it all unnecessary:

"Fathers, be good to your daughters
Daughters will love like you do
Girls become lovers who turn into mothers
So mothers, be good to your daughters too"

Paige (Enchantology) says

I would highly recommend this to anyone interested in feminism *or* anyone who currently identifies as a feminist but hasn't yet read this. hooks has a very accessible writing style and does an impeccable job of pointing out the flaws in the feminist movement and putting forth ideas of what feminism as a movement *should* be if it has any hope of success.

Abi says

"It is the absence of feminist theory that addresses margin and center that had led me to write this book."

Essential reading by Bell Hooks! Honestly a pioneer in intersectional feminist reading.

