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bell hooks: 35 Years from Margin to Center

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Zenzele Isoke
University of Minnesota

It would be something of an understatement to say I owe an immeasurable intellectual debt to bell hooks. Her vision of black women as central to feminist scholarship is foundational to my craft as a black feminist educator and urban ethnographer. I have no fewer than 20 of her titles in my personal library. I return time and again to bell hooks for wisdom, inspiration, clear and indisputable definitions of feminism, and pedagogical insight and technique. Since being tenured, I have devoted two freshman seminars entirely to the study of bell hooks. Without a doubt, these have been some of the most rewarding teaching experiences of my life. Both times, more than half of the enrolled have gone on to either major or minor in feminist studies! With that said, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* is among my least favorite books written by her. This may sound harsh, but allow me to explain.

I find that *From Margin to Center* is most useful for white people who desperately need to learn and unpack how racism and sexism inform both their understanding and their application of feminist theory. The first time I read the book was in 2002. I was a doctoral student taking an undergraduate class on feminist politics at Rutgers University. I was one of two black bodies in a sea of whiteness. I listened to white women refer to bell hooks as “angry,” “mean-spirited,” and “intellectually sloppy.” I watched them cry crocodile tears as they were challenged by other students and pointedly checked by my white female instructor. I watched as the other black woman student in the class called out our instructor for her patronizing tone and problematic phrasing.

That particular class was like getting a tooth pulled. I remember thinking: when we will get to the good stuff? I wanted to talk about how hooks’s definitions of feminism intersected with my own experiences and

how they could inform the production of culturally relevant feminist praxis in African American communities. Instead, the class reaction to hooks ushered me into an excruciating awareness of how isolating and creatively stifling an educational environment drenched by white women's guilt, defensiveness, and ignorance can be. How was it, I remember thinking, that nobody wanted to talk about one of the most gorgeous and, for me, life-changing passages in the whole book, sitting right there in the preface to the first edition. Knowing me, I probably read this passage aloud:

Living as we did — on the edge — we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of the whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary part of that whole. (hooks [1984] 2015b, xviii)

I guess hooks did not make it particularly easy. The concept of black women's marginality is perhaps the one idea that gets the least amount of explicit in-depth analytical treatment in the monograph. Truly, for this, one would need to read *Ain't I a Woman* ([1981] 2015a), *Talking Back* ([1989] 2014), *Yearning* ([1990] 2015d), *Sisters of the Yam* ([1993] 2015c), *Bone Black* ([1996] 2007), or *Rock My Soul* (2003).

In *From Margin to Center*, hooks walks the reader through a nearly exhaustive analysis of the “narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence” of the mainline white feminism of the second wave. Beginning with Betty Friedan and moving through a multidisciplinary body of feminist thinkers and critics of feminists, hooks patiently shows how “racism abounds in the writing of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries” ([1984] 2015b, 3).

Thirty-five years after *From Margin to Center*, we live in an era in which young Americans are being educated to be “color-blind” by majority white female teachers in our public school system. One consequence of this is that white-woman-centered understandings of feminist history and feminist activism prevail in the minds of young people. And, I think it is one reason why this book, while painful, should be essential reading for all undergraduate students in American universities. Thanks to skyrocketing tuition costs, mass incarceration, shrinking wages for the

poor and working classes, and other structural forces of the twenty-first century, cisgender middle-class white womanhood still takes up entirely too much intellectual and interpersonal space on college campuses. Alongside the mainstreaming of white nationalism, many white feminists have become even more emboldened and self-righteous about centering their own victimhood while co-opting theories by black women. The fact that Tarana Burke, a longtime community activist, journalist and independent image maker, has had to reclaim #MeToo as a black woman's movement is a case in point.

In this passage, hooks's prescience on the continuing issue of co-optation is on full display:

The ideology of “competitive, atomistic . . . liberal individualism” has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential of radical feminism. The usurpation of feminism by bourgeois women to support their class interests has been to a very grave extent justified by feminist theory as it has so far been conceived. Any movement to resist the co-optation of feminist struggle must begin by introducing a different feminist perspective — new theory — one that is not informed by the ideology of liberal individualism. ([1984] 2015b, 9)

Ironically, white women's cooptation of black feminist theory has become so pervasive that there are now black women and other women of color who publicly distance themselves from “intersectional feminism” because the term is associated with white female college students. I would be remiss here if I did not mention that a tenured professor in the feminist studies department on my campus did not know that Kimberlé Crenshaw, the law professor who coined the term “intersectionality,” was a black woman and that her theory of intersectionality was based on early articulations of black feminism as much as on her analysis of relevant case law. This practice of divorcing black feminist theory from the lived experience of black female marginality helps to explain how studying “intersectionality” in American culture, politics, and society is much more fashionable and palatable than studying the nuances of “white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy.”

Interestingly, today's racial climate on campus is one reason why the first-person testimonials featured in *From Margin to Center* that recount hooks's experiences of being attacked and criticized by white women when she was a student in the 1970s remain valuable. Feminism both inside and outside of the academy is still most often represented and practiced as a politics of

selfing and self-victimizing based on a one-dimensional understanding of gender. She describes this approach as a form of adopting a “feminist lifestyle,” which, for hooks, ultimately “lacks teeth” ([1984] 2015b, 30). She differentiates this from “feminist movement,” which she argues is rooted in a collective political commitment. She even goes as far to suggest that “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’” (31). Such a challenge remains timely, necessary, and uniquely instructive for students in feminist theory classrooms.

Most black women of my generation did not encounter bell hooks and her ideas in a feminist theory classroom. We learned about her work through word of mouth and in community debates about the “F” word, date rape, and in black feminist protests of the Million Man March. I first heard about her work in a debate in a West African-centered sister circle called Nzinga way back in 1994. For me, what bell hooks had to say about white women and academic feminism was always less important than what she had to say to people of color. Here is one of the underlined and starred passages in my second-edition copy of *From Margin to Center*: “Women of color must confront our absorption of white supremacist beliefs, ‘internalized racism’ which may lead us to feel self-hate, to vent anger and rage at one another, or to lead one ethnic group to make no effort to communicate with another” (hooks [1984] 2015b, 57).

Today, young people come to bell hooks by way of quotes on Black Twitter and Facebook, YouTube videos, zines, blogs, and books written by other black women for a general readership. Her analysis of white supremacy in American culture remains keenly relevant for activists who organize to confront issues like police brutality, state-sponsored police killings, the continued hypersexualization of women in hip hop culture, and sexual predators such as R. Kelly who target black women and girls. Her writing is instructive for those who seek to create autonomous spaces for people of color to work through how white supremacy and racial trauma have devastated our communities and how we can heal by learning how to love our blackness.

bell hooks’s insistence that feminism be a commitment to ending all forms of violence, oppression, and domination by upending the status quo is one of the more overlooked insights of her work. Her fearless commentary on topics as varied as rape culture, parenting, teaching, sexual politics, academic racism, motherhood, media literacy, family and

relationship violence, class consciousness, love, work, and movie-going practices is what has made her such a beloved and cherished intellectual figure for so many. Her eloquent and impassioned calls for each of us to strive to envision teaching, writing, theory making and education, and life itself as the practice of freedom are one of the reasons why I am able to spiritually survive as a black woman in the academy today. When things get hard, I crack open a random page of bell hooks like Protestants do the Bible. With hooks, I always learn something new, and I always have a bit more courage to approach my scholarly craft with integrity, love, and a commitment to tell and live the truth.

There is a holistic and energizing quality to all of hooks's writing. Now, more than ever, we need to deeply consider hooks's pleas for us to adopt a new system of values based on the principles of love, mutuality, and compassion for others. We all stand to benefit from her deeply felt and uncompromising sense of optimism that feminism is not only possible but that it can serve as the basis to fulfill core human needs such as "longing for community, connection, a sense of shared purpose" (hooks [1984] 2015b, 30). These are the core values that are meticulously braided throughout *From Margin to Center*, alongside her spirited critiques of culture and theory. I am always eager to come back to her work and overjoyed to assign it to new generations of students in my classes.

Zenzele Isoke is Associate Professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota: isoke001@umn.edu

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