

Moving away from the language of domination¹

INTERVIEW MED BELL HOOKS

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FR: Why are feminist issues still relevant to a broader public? You mentioned a need to write a feminist book especially for young people?

bh: Feminism is always relevant because we are trying still to tell why women have made great reforms in the last twenty years. We have not made a lot of change in challenging patriarchy at its core, and we are losing so many young people because they felt like feminism is only about equal rights. We have equal rights now so why should we, they think, continue to engage feminist thinking and feminist movement. The big problem is having people see that feminism was not simply about equal rights with men of privileged classes but that it was really about challenging patriarchy and therefore transforming society at its core. So I feel like partially talking to young people is about trying to redo the feminist education that many of us were confronted with. Many of us came to feminist thinking and fe-

minist theory, theorizing only when we reached the college level. What we see now is that many students are so resistant already before they get to the college level. So this is why I would like to do more work around educating young people about what feminism really is and what it can do to transform your life in a way that is life affirming and life enhancing.

FR: Do you have any ideas how that kind of book would be like? You talk about a small pamphlet that was easy to read and handy.

bh: It should be a sort of hip-hop pamphlet with a more vernacular language, not so much written in an academic language. But using the vernaculars that young people are using, and I think this has been very difficult because of how location informs your awareness of things, so for me there's a problem there. We can use certain vernaculars but once you become an academic there becomes so much pressure on you not to use those vernaculars that we often forget that and then we can't speak the language that people need us to speak. And I believe for all political organizing that is revolutionary that you have to start where people are. That if you try to make people come to some other place your movement really will tend to fail, unless you are able to find such a language. So in that sense, I want to try to go where I think young people are and speak in a language that is useful. Because sometimes especially young males will say to me: "Where's the book that we can read? We don't understand what sexism is or we don't understand how it is relevant to us. We don't have any power." Because if it's so much about work and equal power with men of class privilege then young males feel "this has nothing to do with me", so in part I would like to do a book that would be small enough to be passed around, witty and interesting enough to be read. But

that would also incorporate some discussion with young people themselves.

YM: Both men and women?

bh: Yes, very much both men and women. Because I think we are still living in a world, especially for girls who are adolescent who often take their cues more from boys than when you're in your twenties and may be exploring more autonomously. So the more we can interest boys in feminist thinking, really, the more we might interest girls in feminist thinking.

FR: You're going to Bologna in Italy to give a talk at the Womens Center where they will open a chamber in honour of Hannah Arendt and bell hooks. You have told us that you will talk about the difficulties in finding a proper name for the children of African immigrants that have been born in Italy. It seems to be a world wide problem, at least for white people and the dominant culture. So how do we signify or call the children with such a heritage or background?

bh: I think for both the United States and Europe, diversity and multi-culturalism has challenged us to come up with new language. The fact is that many times in the past when you talked about the idea of the citizen, the identity of the citizen, it was very one-dimensional. You were either black or white or, you know, American or foreign. Now what do you do with someone who is born in America of let's say Turkish parents who speaks not English as a first language but who is in effect American? I mean the way in which we talk about the citizen, in those one-dimensional ways, troubles us, and it becomes even worse, if that person have dark skin, so when they're out in the streets, the world sees them as black. The complicated notions of identity, I think this have been the challenge for a left-politics to think about how do we introduce ways of

talking about identity that encompass the multi-dimensionality of identity in a global diverse world. In the past if you said someone was Italian, people assumed this person would be white skinned. Nowadays when you say so-and-so is this or that, British or what, you can't just assume the person will have white skin. Every time I go to London I am always amazed by the visual mul-

ti-culturalism on the everyday life, even more so than New York, because you recognize in London that you're hearing so many different languages as you go about your daily life. I think that part of the challenge that Europe and places like Italy is how to define the notion of the citizen. Otherwise, what ends up happening is people have a new marginalism that is ethni-

bell hooks. Foto: Yvonne Mørck



cally based that is to say, people begin to say: “Well, when the first immigrants, black immigrants, came to Italy they were told you can’t be an Italian because you were not born into this culture and into this language.” But now that there are black people who are born into that culture and into that language, the definition changes and people say “But you can’t be a citizen un-

less generations of your family are Italian speaking”. So what we see now is that it begins to bring an ethnic nationalism to bear on the idea of the citizen. The same is happening in Spain in places like Barcelona, where it no longer is enough that you can speak Spanish and be identified as an authentic citizen, but where you also have to be able to speak Catalan, so that black people particularly and other people of color coming from other places have trouble being identified as being a citizen, because they can’t say: “Oh, my uncle was Catalan or my great-grandparents”. So I think part of the challenge for us is to come up with new ways to speak of citizenship and to speak it in a way that honors multiple locations that does not make one location superior so we have new hierarchies. In that way one location becomes superior to the other locations. And to do that we have to challenge white supremacy because it’s white supremacy. It used to be the language of your mother tongue that defined you as a citizen but now it has to be that your grandparents were born here and so it’s a way of keeping whiteness always at the center of that national identity. So in part we’ll be talking about language, when we enter the discussions of identity. You know, now in the States you hear much more African-Caribbean and also, you know, African-Caribbean-American or identities that tried to take in place every one’s all the locations that a person may be coming from.

FR: Yvonne has just published a book with the title “Bindestregsdanskere” which could be translated to “Hyphenated Danes”. It’s about the way in which the second generation perceive themselves. There’s an academic debate about the difference between hyphenated identities and hybrid identities. Do you think that is a relevant question or is it just an academic debate?



bh: I think, what we see is people are capable of great fluidity and that one can have both the hyphen in hybridity and you can have the hyphen without hybridity. I think the main thing that we all know from real life experience is that people are much more flexible and that people can in fact have a multiple terminology that they invoke for different locations. And that in fact what that means is that one can have a hybridity at the same time that you can lay claim to your hyphens as well. It requires all of us moving away from the language of domination which was always either or. You are one thing or the other. Instead of you are both things, and some which the hyphenated and hybridity allows. You know, when someone says that they are African-Caribbean-American they are putting their hyphen African-Caribbean which can include both Africa and being black in America at the same time that they're saying but my culture, my family of origin is Caribbean. All of those things can happen. It's almost like a kind of joggling. And at different points in time, I'm sure, when that person goes, let's say, home to Haiti or home to Jamaica, the Caribbean is the part of that identity that's emphasized but when they're in the US, let's say when they are going to get a job, they may want to emphasize more the American part of that, but if they're in an all-black community they may want to emphasize more the African part. And that I think is the fluidity right now that post-modernism created around the fact that people were moved in and out of locations and they would need multiple linguistic strategies to exist and communicate in those locations.

YM: Is there the same possibility of gender crossing, if you're a woman or if you're a man?

bh: Well, only if we're talking about the question of identity. I think if we're talking about border crossing, there is not the

same fluidity for women as there is for men because there is much more policing of the movement of women, particularly migrant women, whether we are talking about the US or Europe. Right now the US has a lot of immigrants from, say Poland, and Polish men go out to work and as they go out to work they begin to speak English but maybe there is a woman at home who doesn't go out at all. She doesn't speak English. Her children are learning how to speak English at school. The father is learning how to speak English so he can master the world of work but she is becoming very isolated and she is not learning this as well. There we see this gendered nature, since she is not perceived as needing to enter a public life in any way. So border crossing becomes very much a question of gendered identities within specific cultural locations. When we went to *Christiania* the other day, I pointed out to Flemming that I saw many different men of many different cultures but I visually was the only black woman that I saw and I felt a certain otherness there. I felt that I was much more someone who stood out because of being a black woman where part of what we know as imperialist wars have led men of all races to go everywhere. Whether we are either talking about wars or the desire to conquer land, we don't see that same movement with women and when we come to women of color, especially those of us coming from fundamentalist religious backgrounds who, you know, insist on a woman's place as silent and obedient, you don't see that same fluidity of movement and border crossing. And from a feminist standpoint we know that women of all races and ethnicities, are always subject to the threat of rape in the act of border crossing, whether it's a white woman running around a black neighbourhood in Brazil or Harlem in the middle of the night or a black woman running around *Christiania*, you know, in the middle of the night who is identified as not belonging to that particular territory or space.

I think there hasn't been enough work done on women and travel and journeying and the kinds of ways in which certain kinds of movement enhance the lives of men, as often women are not allowed that same opportunity.

I think for example, since I have been in both Norway and Denmark I've been looking a lot at advertisements. There are many more advertisements, as in the US, that have a black male than a black female. Because in the US, particularly sex, race and class together make the black female a much less desirable "object", you know. So that you don't think that you can sell your product to everybody with a black woman. The moment you have the image of a black woman the product is seen as less universal and more specific. Whereas black men, because they have become more desirable as commodities everywhere, through sports, through the ascendancy of say a symbolic icon like for example Michael Jordan, who signifies a kind of global capitalism, so that there's this sense that his body as the body of the male and as the dark body of the male symbolizing a kind of hard masculinity, can travel in a way that women can't. The female body is always kept in check in some way.

FR: But if you look at the music industry, then it's not the case. I mean, there are lots of female singers of mixed descent in both Denmark and maybe even more in Sweden.

bh: Well, but this has not happened long enough for us to see the kind of impact it will have on how people think about female. Particularly because we have so many new groups like the Spice Girls, who are also asserting a kind of feminist adventurism with their music whether or not that will actually change how people perceive the female. In fact it will always be kind of secondary to the image of the male. What we also know in the US is that, when people choose a black male image they feel that

image stands for all black people so you don't have to worry about including a female because you feel that you have included blackness by having the image of the male.

What we know, especially in terms of children, because on a lot of children's TV and children's books there will always be the little black boy but no girl, that this has a tremendous negative impact on the self-esteem of little black girls because they always see they're not there. Particularly now too with certain kinds of children's movies where you have the heroic boys, you know. And where you have these adorable black boys but there's no black female so there's someone for the white female to identify with that she's a part of the magical world, but there's no little dark girl who is a part of the magical world. I think all of this has a lot to do with the question for women and journeying.

In my own life I have also begun to write children's books because I had a lot of black mothers and white mothers who were saying to me, and it's always mothers, who said: "We need this cultural criticism before they become, you know, adolescents. We need to know, we need to teach them how to think critically before high school, before college. Why don't you write some things for children?". That has made me think about that as a form of political activism. That again, I think when feminist movement first began in the US, contemporary feminist movement, there was a lot more focus on children and books for children and challenging a lot around children. Nowadays there's a kind of laziness that has come back in with a certain kind of privileged liberal individualism where there's this sense that childhood should be this special place where you shouldn't try to shape the mind of the child in any way. So when your little feminist boy wants to have a gun and pretend that he's shooting the Indians every day, you don't try to change that. Whereas early on, there was much more critique

of those kinds of social conditioning of children.

YM: Have you written books for children earlier?

bh: I have written books for children. My first one will come out in January and it's about hair. It's called "Happy to Be Nappy" and it's about a black girl who is having great fun having her natural hair. And politically in terms of capitalism, black people all over the world, but particularly in America spend enormous amounts of money, billions of dollars, on hair care products that are aimed at straightening our hair and yet, we don't even have one progressive black educational institution in the States. We have predominantly black colleges but they are conservative, usually, no kind of think tanks that are sort of self-determining, where progressive black people are engaged in those things, and yet we spend all of this money on hair stuff. It was interesting to me because I wanted to write this book as part of a political project but I wanted it to be a very playful silly book, not a heavy didactic book, because one of the problems around race is that a lot of books that have been created for black children specifically are heavily didactic and have no kind of imaginative artistic element in them. They're just heavy-handed. So I'm quite excited by this.

FR: Many years ago when I was reading one of your books, I was intrigued by the fact that you were using the concept of self-recovery. Last Saturday on the Danish television there was "Boyz -n- the Hood". Afterwards I read your interview with Ice Cube.² You were talking about the concept of self-hate and self-love and how to find ways in which you could transform your energies to the black communities, or the African-American communities, preferring self-love instead of self-hate. And that seems to be more and more relevant, because the black

underclass is getting bigger and bigger and the conditions are getting worse and worse.

bh: But not just in America, all around the world we're seeing that, the darker you are, the poorer you are. The sort of black underclass, even if we're talking about predominantly black countries, we are still seeing in those countries that the underclass tends to be a darker skinned body of poor people. I think that Stuart Hall's work on representation has been so important. He clearly talks about how the control of images and representations often determines, over-determines, how any group of people is capable of seeing themselves, and how much controlling representations is essential to colonizing projects. Whether we are talking about black people in the US or immigrants in England or Italy or Denmark or Norway, clearly the power to manipulate images and to decide how people will be seen is still part of a colonizing strategy. Often, for example, people will ask me, even in the US: "Are you American?" Because they have an idea of black women from movies that we are very aggressive and loud so when I'm not those things, the assumption has to be, that you are something else. Because you are not like the way mass-media has represented you. Many people don't realize that the US has very much been a racially stratified society with a lot of segregation. They don't know that there are only very few mixed neighbourhoods. A place like England has much more progressive policy around housing discrimination than a place like the United States. Many white South Africans who came to the US years ago, were shocked because they found the same type of segregation that they had been told, you don't have in the United States. But it's a segregation based on the convergence of class and race. So that you can have an all-white neighbourhood, even in the city like New York, the most multi-ethnic city in the United States on many levels. When it comes

to housing there is tremendous segregation. And it's very hard because it's very subtle and we don't have the kind of laws to prove that you are being discriminated against. Whereas in London, it's much easier for people to take action against discrimination, and there are not that many neighbourhoods that are completely all-white. Whereas, there is no state in the United States that won't have its completely all-white neighbourhoods. Just because you have the money doesn't mean that you can live in those neighbourhoods. There's a new book about it by a black woman, she is a black woman who can pass for white, and she talks about how she buys a house in an all-white neighbourhood but when her black darker skinned husband comes, the kind of hatred that they experience is remarkable. And we are not talking about twenty years ago. We are talking about five years ago and four years ago and in a very privileged, white, Jewish part of Connecticut. But a part of Connecticut that doesn't want to have black people, that bad element. And people think of black people as this dangerous element because of movies like "Boyz -n- the Hood". Sometimes I say that part of why we critique mass-media so much is that it is the pedagogy of difference, it's where people go to learn about people not like themselves. Whether people should do that or not is not the point, they do. People see a film and it has a certain image of black masculinity and they think, "this is how black men are". In actuality, I thought black people should boycott a film like "Boyz -n- the Hood".

FR: But there are also a lot of positive types of masculinity, not a lot, but there are at least three or four different ways of coping with the male role.

bh: In *Boyz -n- the Hood*?

FR: The father, Doughnut and the guy that was shot.

bh: But this is where you get it wrong, I think. I think as intellectuals, we look at that film and we say, there were many different types of masculinity, but when you talk to people who actually saw that, they did not see those different types of masculinity. They saw the one that most conformed to the prevailing racist, sexist stereotype. Because it is the one that stays in your mind. Even myself, a sophisticated critic and an audience of film as I am, if we were doing a game where you said: "What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think *Boyz -n- the Hood*?" The first thing that comes to my mind is the scene in the Korean grocery where those people are being shot. That is the image of black masculinity that prevails. That scene stays with me, although there is not really that kind of violence between Asian and black people as a common thing. So it's so out of the ordinary. We want to argue for more complex images, I don't like the idea: "Let's just have positive images of blackness" or "Let's just have positive images of Islam". Let's have complex images! But it's very difficult to do, unless you educate your audience to be capable of recognizing the complex images. Otherwise people will simply take out the things that most conform to their perceptions and not the complexity that lies behind.

NOTER

1. Interviewet er udskrevet af stud. mag. Puk Degnegaard og bearbejdet af kultursociolog Flemming Røgilds.

2. Se bell hooks (1994): *Ice Cube Culture. A shared passion for speaking truth*. I *Outlaw Culture*. Routledge, London.

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