

## **Analysis of Feminist Theorizing Through the Lens of bell hooks**

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*Please note that the author's pen name bell hooks is intentionally transcribed in lower case letters, as per the author's intention in defining her work within political contexts, rather than through a name alone.*

Discussions leading to a redefining and a reconceptualizing of what signifies feminist theorizing are presented in the essay titled *Theory as Liberatory Practice* (hooks, 1991), in which dialogue and self-reflection provide healing through the conduit of critical thought. Through the examination of deeply personal experiences, beginning with early childhood, in which the author was executing theory, perhaps without realizing it, moving into conversing with women in her community, as well as incarcerated Black men unlearning the sexism which has plagued them, hooks outlines an experience of theorizing which emerges as a central development in making sense of the world and one's purpose in it. Realities related to oppression and exclusion within academic spheres due to socially constructed realities, such as gender, sexual orientation, race and socioeconomic status, become vital places of exploration in which intersectionality emerges within hooks personal lived experience, revealing the power of critical thought. hooks draws the reader into contemplating the experience and accessibility of theorizing removed from academia, which it is largely relegated to, resulting in a lack of access. However, it is these repressive social forces which create borders of 'those who can' and 'those who cannot' which feminist discourse has sought to liberate. Consequently, feminism exists as a political movement "which seeks freedom for all those who are oppressed" (Biana, 2020, p. 17; Henry, Dicker & Piepmeier 2003, p. 8), not only women.

Sium and Ritskes (2013) discuss the energy which exists in theorizing through modalities such as oral dialogue and storytelling, which they consider a redefining of intellectual thought and its legitimacy, while the practice exists as imperative to resistance and sovereignty within post-colonial frameworks. "Scholarship" they argue, "is a process that begins with the self" (p. iv). hooks suggests the act of talking can be a form of resistance as well as political action, and to

do so is to engage in theorizing which is potentially free from the societal divisions, authorities, and assumptions about knowledge which permeate academia. It is in this experience, where the “commodification of feminism” (hooks, 1991, p. 9) does not exist, and where the goal of transforming consciousness occurs. The conversations which occur outside of academic classrooms may be considered revolutionary, as well as vital to theory, action and purposeful outcomes. hooks considers words synonymous with actions, and thus they understand the collective struggle to discuss and move through relative issues without censorship or interruption from institutions which in itself is a “subversive practice” (p. 6). Such engagements can be just as relative to one’s sense of worth and identity, as well as collective struggles related to liberation. Similarly, Mohanty (2003) draws on feminist concepts arguing that the ultimate goal of any education is to experience liberation (p. 200). Mohanty states “Analysis begins from and is anchored in the place of the most marginalized communities of women – poor women of all colors in affluent and neocolonial nations...” (p. 231). Furthermore, Mohanty identifies the importance of theory and accessible education as a medium for linking personal experiences with collective and historical realities (p. 184).

Collins (2000) expresses that a substantial amount of the academic education she obtained was designed to alienate her from communities of origin, family, and even her own self in order to produce “credible intellectual work” (p. vii). Consequently, through awareness and deconstruction, Collins was able to observe the struggles of Black women accurately and respond with her own theory. hooks argues that theorizing in this form allows individuals to comprehend their realities, including harmful experiences, and injustice, and to challenge social norms and worldviews which continue to allow such realities. In her essay, hooks reveals that theory can exist as a form of liberation as well as a safe place to ‘mediate’ in an effort to

understand why life occurs the way it sometimes does. Such perspectives offer a deeply therapeutic and enlightening experience which likely could not be obtained within academia.

Sandoval (1991) argues that the potential for liberatory experience as theorized through women of color has the possibility to be embraced as a point of “departure and a method for transforming repressive” social realities (p. 6), aligning with hooks’ personal experience. Moreover, there is the suggestion that individuals must connect to their experiences and access relatable practices in tangible ways, and thus potentially experience forms of liberation combined with awareness and lived change. This leads into consideration that many individuals who arrive at theorizing or participation in social movements have a lifetime of struggle and pain behind them, prompting an examination of alternative modes of education as well as an expansion on theoretical content. hooks inquires as to why feminist discourse is not more accessible to wider demographics, particularly children of color, when it has evidentially transformed beliefs and values of prisoners. hooks asserts that locating theory and integrating it are vital prior to undergoing “years of emotional assault” (p. 10). The author persuasively reveals how theorizing is a process in the search for belonging and a sense of ‘home,’ as critical thought processing is intertwined with emotional pain and discomfort, while moving towards ‘wholeness’ and a sense of worth. Indeed, hooks states that theory itself is not innately liberating or healing unless there is a conscious intention to do so (p. 2).

hooks determines through her essay that critical reflection and dialogue with self and others can be equally if not more “engaging in feminist struggle” (p. 3), than academic discourse or political action as such reflections and dialogues are often removed from the ‘forces that be’ which attempt to define, control, and interpret others’ experiences for a separate agenda, while sustaining hierarchal realities. hooks stresses throughout her essay that discussion and relevant

bodies of work which include real women living various realities, whether traditionally educated or not, (as opposed to solely engaging in academic rhetoric and analysis) are the fabric which is woven into the feminist struggle and cannot be underestimated. hooks argues that work originating from marginalized women which promotes feminist practice is often delegitimized within academia (p. 4), particularly if the work is written in a form which renders it accessible to a broader public. This argument is effective in providing perspective to what constitutes theorizing, which hooks presents as accessible to anyone, anywhere with an experience to share. The lived realities of women, particularly in oppressive and marginalized realities, contribute to the foundations of feminist, racial, and gender discourse, and such voices must be acknowledged and included. Furthermore, any theory “that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” (p. 5). Theorizing in its purest form is the development of modes that allow a perceiving of the world through the lenses of the “scapegoated, marginalized, enslaved, and colonized” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 34) in an attempt to make sense of reality.

hooks invites the reader to imagine critical conversations and the transformative power of theorizing that is removed from academic settings and is also accessible, juxtaposing a woman immersed in the discourse and norms of academia while not identifying, resulting in a traumatic experience not dissimilar from various forms of abuse. Inevitably, such women’s experience of humiliation and a “stripping away of value occur” (p. 5), revealing hypocrisy within feminist study. hooks raises the fundamental question of the value of feminist theory if it “literally beats (women) down” (p. 5), informing a corporeality which places the entire body of women’s studies into question. Therefore, according to hooks, if women on the margins who inform feminist discourse cannot access the knowledge and empowerment, then the current reality of legitimizing women’s studies through the “eyes of the ruling patriarchy” (p. 5) will never result

in the advancement of feminist struggle. It is this reality that hooks effectively expresses, revealing the gap between theory and practice and moreover how theorizing can exist and be accessed in more wholistic and expansive forms, resulting in activism in a room, or out on the streets. It is the “personal testimony and personal experience” (p. 8) that provides the foundation for liberatory feminist theory.

### **Conclusion**

*Theory as Liberatory Practice* asks the reader to consider not only the lived realities of a woman of color, but also the power of theorizing and accessing it in a way that allows for transformation and integration. The reader is left at the end of hooks essay with the opportunity to use critical thinking and discussion as tangible tools for addressing lived realities, despite meeting resistance and dismissal within the contemporary academic world. hooks extends the significance of oral transmission as equally if not more vital than the written word in contributing to change, offering a reminder that private and community conversations cannot be underestimated in their momentum and function. Such pedagogies, for example, have existed among Indigenous communities for thousands of years effectively and speak to the multidimensional witnessing and experiencing of knowledge which must move beyond the Eurocentric values inherent within contemporary academia. “We must recognize stories as acts of creative rebellion” (Sium, Ritskes, 2013, p. v), which occupy space in the dismantling of oppressive realities as well as decolonization. Transformation exists in greater social spheres undoubtedly, but also in oral experiences and transmission. It is through diverse feminist discourse and theorizing that radical worldviews can be developed, in which realities such as racism, classism and sexism can change (Koyama, 2001, p. 259).

For theorizing within feminist frameworks to be grounded in the lived realities of women that it seeks answers for, women of all realities must be included. Individuals with less power within society such as non-heteronormative identities, as well as people of color are essential in feminist theorizing to progress towards comprehensive movement and organizing, and ultimately liberation. The popular phrase *the political is personal* becomes relevant, as the personal experiences of women's lives are shaped by the social forces at economic, cultural and political levels. Therefore, to accurately engage in theorizing and potentially create new feminist theory and thought which contributes to women's lives in a meaningful way, the daily lived realities of people who have been historically excluded from participating in and contributing to academic knowledge become vital, while conversations in rooms or on the streets remain fertile ground for the greater feminist movement.

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