

collective embrace of forms of power that are “creative and life-affirming” (85) and thereby refuse power’s equation with “hierarchical rule and coercive authority” (118). It is this untruth, hooks concludes, that furnishes “the foundation on which sexist ideology and other ideologies of group oppression are based” (118). To eradicate this lie, perhaps for the first time, we must learn how to exercise power in the service of fashioning a world to which all belong equally.

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Sisterhood Is Powerful, but Must It Be Political?

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In recent years, and especially since the 2018 midterm elections, there has been renewed attention to the idea of feminist “sisterhood.” Panicked discussions about white women voting for Donald Trump in large numbers or toeing the conservative line animated popular and political discourse. For those who are versed in feminist history and the literature of women and politics, however, there is little surprise in the ideological outcomes of elections that break along racial and gender lines (see, e.g., Junn 2016) or the fraught history of notions of political “sisterhood” (Price 2018).

This is part of what was refreshing in rereading bell hooks’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: we had a tangible reminder that many of the land mines of contemporary feminist and U.S. politics have had a long history of analysis and critique. Indeed, bell hooks takes a razor-sharp edge in criticizing the idea of feminist sisterhood, at least as imagined in mid-twentieth-century activist and intellectual circles. For bourgeois white feminists, according to hooks, the idea of “support” among women and the promotion of a sense of shared victimization justified a call to sisterhood ([1984] 2015, 64). This call, however, rang hollow for working-class women and/or women of color. As hooks recounts, “It is terribly apparent that feminist movement so far has primarily served the class interests of

bourgeois white women and men” (60). They had little patience for what amounted to a reform-based politics that was framed in universal language but based on the interests of elite white women (60–62). For hooks, the problem lay not in the frame of sisterhood per se, but in the failure to realize that it was still an aspiration and not an achievement, that the hard work of acknowledging differences, committing to revolutionary change in terms of ending not only sexism but also racism and class exploitation, and building solidarity had not yet been done (60–67).

Although sisterhood can, under certain circumstances, be powerful, I am not convinced that it is especially useful as a frame in building social movements or in formal politics. There is, I would argue, a pressing need to assess the sharpened contradictions in postracial, postfeminist politics (Alexander-Floyd 2012), to demand more than what sisterhood and the reformist politics with which it is typically associated provide.

One reason sisterhood is a problematic driver of political development is that it is difficult to wrest it from its association with biology or some sedimented notion of essentialized gender identity. Some have certainly lodged criticism against sororities and fraternities: for instance, E. Franklin Frazier’s assessment in his classic *The Black Bourgeoisie* ([1957] 1997) readily comes to mind. The sisterhoods and brotherhoods forged in these organizations, however, are ostensibly based on an agreed-upon sense of values, organizational origin stories, and missions. These are negotiated over time, to be sure, but largely established.

The forging of sisterhood across race, class, and other markers of difference, which hooks holds up as a possibility for radical politics, was in little evidence in feminist circles in 1984 when the book was first published — and things are not much better now. In contrast to the active, difficult work of cultivating solidarity that hooks imagines as a possibility, sisterhood as a political calling card trends toward simplistic modes of identification that link gender with presumed or desired ideology and affiliation. This hegemonic formulation is difficult to overcome. Although the outcome of the 2016 presidential election is certainly overdetermined — WikiLeaks, Russian interference, “her emails,” voter suppression, economic anxiety, race baiting, a truncated get-out-the-vote ground game, and more are all significant — the popular slogan for Team Clinton, “I’m with her,” was a bet on a weak gambit of this problematic mode of identification. And even when the appeal of political sisterhood, whether explicit or implicit, does work, it is problematic because it affirms essentialized notions of identity.

In a related vein, sisterhood (whether as an explicit or implicit goal) is also troubling because it assumes a consensus among “women” about what is in their best interests, ignoring the very real differences in experiences and ideological cleavages among women. Indeed, hooks rightly observes that the guise of sisterhood “mask[ed] the opportunism of manipulative bourgeois white women” ([1984] 2015, 44) and insists that much of hegemonic feminism generated reformist priorities at best (159–60). Today, the focus on formal equality or descriptive representation, without a discussion of ideological complexity and diversity, is a close cousin of the sisterhood frame. Access to institutional representation in and of itself is of limited value without a direct connection to substantive changes in the business-as-usual of politics. And what is needed more than ever is a clarification of political differences, not their submergence.

This point is made clearly by two recent examples. The first concerns reactions to some women of color in Congress. The 2018 midterms ushered a record number of women into the U.S. Congress, a fact rightly celebrated by some. Still, as I write, there is much consternation in some circles about the “acting out” of some new congresswomen of color and the ways in which they disrupt the normative modes of being, relating, and intervening in Congress. Labeled naive or upstarts, Democratic congresswomen such as Representatives Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib have been silenced or chastised. The popular press and even some Democrats have criticized Ocasio-Cortez for her outspokenness and left-leaning ideals (Chittal 2019). Omar faced censure by Congress for comments she made regarding Israel; in response to her remarks, a resolution condemning antisemitism and other forms of discrimination was passed on March 7, 2019, by a 407–23 vote (Pentchoukov 2019).

Tlaib rightly called out Republicans, specifically Trump and Representative Mark Meadows, for advancing the idea that hiring Black people means you are not racist. Meadows infamously used the presence of a Black female Trump administration official during Michael Cohen’s testimony to suggest Trump is not racist. Tlaib remarked, “Just because someone has a person of color—a black person—working for them does not mean they aren’t racist. And . . . the fact that someone would actually use a prop — a black woman — in this chamber, in this committee is alone racist in itself” (Chittal 2019). After Meadows objected and asked to have Tlaib’s words stricken from the record, committee chair Elijah

Cummings, in a controversial move, affirmed Meadows and led Tlaib to “clarify” that she was not calling Meadows a racist.

There is far more to assess here than can be captured in this essay, but one thing stands clear: the reformist model of sisterhood or a simple emphasis on descriptive representation is one that cannot sustain women of color with radical commitments. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s desire to push her party to the “center” strikes the wrong chord for Democratic Party politics. Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council pushed that agenda decades ago, and the Clintons spent considerable time in the 2016 presidential election backing away from, if not repudiating, the three-strikes felony rule, the characterization of young Blacks as “superpredators,” and other results of Clinton and the Democratic Party’s rightward drift.

The reception of senator and presidential hopeful Kamala Harris provides a second example of why essentialist modes of identification or support for “sisterhood” is a problem. Harris’s racial and gender identities are often touted as laudable in and of themselves and in ways that “mystify” (to use bell hooks’s phrasing) the limitations of her political vision and commitments. In her May 2019 essay on Harris for the *Atlantic*, for instance, Elizabeth Weil (2019) writes,

Harris’s demographic identity has always been radical. She was San Francisco’s first female district attorney, first black district attorney, first Asian American district attorney. She was then California’s first female attorney general, first black attorney general, first Asian American attorney general. She was the second black woman, ever, to win a seat in the United States Senate. But in office, she’s avoided saying or doing much that could be held against her.

Weil goes on to suggest that Harris wisely stored up political capital to spend down the road and that now, as she “takes her shot” for the presidency, she is poised to take a more progressive course. This type of emphasis on symbolic politics frustrates radical possibilities. Feminists are no longer “living for the revolution” (Francis Beal, quoted in Springer 2005, 1); we are living for the next election cycle. It is not surprising that representation of gender or racial diversity in office would proliferate in an increasingly diverse society. What is surprising is that more scholars and activists are not willing to examine the ways in which symbolic politics can serve neoliberal social and political management strategies.

Condoleezza Rice’s and Hillary Clinton’s tenures as secretary of state are but two examples of the ways in which race and gender “decoys” (Eisenstein 2007) are the face of state and imperialist power. The recent

history of Barack Obama's presidency, moreover, which now seems even more beyond critical investigation against the backdrop of the Trump presidency, should serve as an example of what can go awry with symbolism (Harris 2012). When essentialist modes of identification are marshaled in support of political figures, constituents feel inclined to protect politicians who have a rough time as "space invaders" (Puwar 2004) in new political territory, over and against pressing them for results that would change their lives.

bell hooks was right to insist on the long hard road of movement building in concrete terms. Sisterhood and the reformist, symbolic politics with which it is often associated, however, is a frame that has little purchase for progressive politics.

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Explaining Feminist Failure

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Today, hardly anyone speaks of feminist revolution.
— bell hooks ([1984] 2015, 159)

At a moment when xenophobic nationalism has been mobilized by right-wing leaders across the globe, bell hooks's critique of the profound limitations of bourgeois feminism appears remarkably prescient. When anti-immigrant rhetoric is cavalierly deployed to shore up white supremacy in Europe and North America, her cautions about the pervasiveness and persistence of racism remain as telling as ever. When the world's richest 42 people have greater wealth than the poorest half of the human population — 3.7 billion people (Elliott 2018) — her claim that socialist feminists have not succeeded in making class war a priority for feminism seems undeniable. In a year when the Women's March splintered over charges of anti-Semitism and homophobia, hooks's insistence that solidarity among women will be possible only when "racial, class, and a host of other prejudices are recognized" ([1984] 2015, 44) and eliminated seems altogether prophetic.

Yet hooks's diagnosis of feminism's failure "to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture . . . and to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism" ([1984] 2015, 26), capitalist expansion, militarism, and the white supremacist patriarchal system seems far too insular to account for the seismic transformations that have characterized the past four decades. In hooks's account, white feminist theory shoulders most of the blame for feminism's failure to create a mass base. In co-opting feminism to advance their own class interests, white bourgeois feminist thinkers have theorized sexism, family relations, education, work, male-female dynamics, power, sexuality, and social change in ways that have alienated