

## *Black Women and the Intersectional Politics of Experience*

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Thirty-five years after the publication of bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, feminists continue to debate one of the book's core themes — namely, that foregrounding black women's voices in intersectional theorizing is a politically promising *and* perilous act. hooks's specific argument is that black women's location within the “prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure” affords them a “unique” and “central role . . . in the making of feminist theory” ([1984] 2015, 16). hooks is equally adamant that women, including black women, mistakenly believe that “describing” or highlighting their particular “experience of oppression” is necessarily “synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness” (26).

Many contemporary feminists similarly argue that although “reliance on black women's experiences” is often part of a well-intentioned effort “to underscore problems of exclusion within feminist and anti-racist theory,” this phenomenon is problematic because it erroneously depicts black women as a “unitary and monolithic entity” unmarked by sexual, class, and other differences (Nash 2008, 8; see also Hancock 2007). A related argument is that intersectionality is an emancipatory analytical framework precisely because it seeks to deconstruct, rather than embrace, the flawed, “calcified” notion that “black woman” and other social groups are static entities (Dhamoon 2011, 239; see also McCall 2005).

Other contemporary feminists conclude, in sharp contrast, that it is important to privilege black women's voices when contemplating the co-constitutive dimensions of race, gender, and other inequalities of power. Doing so, these feminists assert, provides black women with a “tool for analyzing and responding to the material realities” of their oppression (Jordan-Zachery 2014, 34–35; May 2015). Still other feminists contend that centering black women as intersectionality's principal research subjects undermines racist white women's ability to determine that “racialized women's structural experience cannot generate theory” (Bilge 2013, 412; see also Crenshaw 2016).

Why does recent intersectional scholarship so clearly echo hooks's own contention, in *Feminist Theory*, that the wisdom of foregrounding black women's voices in intersectional theorizing is very much subject to debate? The answer is that hooks's work is significant not only because it still animates feminist research but also because it offers an important, pioneering explanation of *why* contemporary feminists disagree about black women's place in intersectional theorizing. This explanation, plainly put, is that the dialectic between "experience" and "politics" informs how marginalized social groups, including women, understand their oppression.

hooks's argument is twofold. She demonstrates, on the one hand, that experiencing oppression often motivates marginalized groups' liberatory politics. In her own words, "revolutionary ideology can be created only if the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed, and incorporated" (hooks [1984] 2015, 163). Put otherwise, "identifying and describing" oppression is often "synonymous" with marginalized social groups' ability and willingness to forge a "critical political consciousness" (26). Black women, hooks emphasizes, are no exception. Their "lived experience" imbues them with a "world view" that "directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology" (15).

On the other hand, hooks also reveals that harmful a priori politics often shape social groups', including women's, understanding of why they experience oppression. A prime example, hooks explains, is that "race and class biases" ([1984] 2015, 4) distort white middle-class feminists' sense of what it means to experience gender-based oppression. The outcome is a feminist movement that is not "true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (3) but is instead "shaped by politics" (26) that casts working outside of the home and/or eschewing motherhood as the true markers of liberation.

Equally concerning for hooks is that "non-white women" are not immune from the harmful political assumptions that often undergird social groups' understandings of why they are oppressed. By this, hooks means that many black women "feel that their definitions of the party line, whether on the issue of black feminism or on other issues, is the only legitimate discourse." As a result, they do not "encourage a diversity of voices, critical dialogue, and controversy" but "stifle dissent" by presuming that they alone are "best able to judge whether other women's voices should be heard" (hooks [1984] 2015, 10).

hooks's assertion — that being oppressed leads black women to embrace antiracist, feminist, and otherwise progressive politics *and* that their understanding of why they are oppressed is often informed by exclusionary, oppressive politics — reveals much about the ongoing debate about black women's status in intersectional theorizing. First, hooks's argument lends credence to the perspective of those participants in the debate who contend that to engage in intersectional theorizing is, by definition, to foreground black women's voices. I say this because, according to hooks's reasoning, experiencing oppression leads black women to not only become political but to also do so in ways that are explicitly intersectional.

Consider her declaration that black women should “make use” of the “special vantage point our marginality gives us” not just because doing so demonstrates that “our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege” but also because such a move makes it possible to “criticize . . . dominant racist, classist, [and] sexist hegemony” ([1984] 2015, 16). In other words, if black women's experience of intersectional oppression provides them with “special” political insight about how best to resist subordination at the crossroads of race, gender, and class, then it stands to reason, hooks asserts, that their voices can and should take center stage in intersectional theory.

At the same time, hooks's parallel contention — that the meaning of oppression is always already a political construct — sheds light on why some feminists might be inclined to resist privileging black women's voices in intersectional research. To begin with, if it is the case that experiencing oppression, including intersectional oppression, is a politically defined phenomenon, then it is quite reasonable to conclude that intersectional research can be (re)constructed to include or *not* include black women. In addition, hooks's concomitant claim — that ideological and other differences shape non-white women's diverse understandings of why they experience oppression — suggests that it is in fact impossible to speak of “black women” as a homogenous group within the context of intersectional scholarship.

As the preceding paragraphs make clear, *Feminist Theory* is hardly alone in exploring black women's role in intersectional theorizing. Moreover, hooks is not the first feminist theorist to posit a dialectic between being oppressed and embracing a specific politics. Nancy Hartsock argues that articulating their experience of oppression leads some women to a feminist “standpoint” and that this standpoint is often “conditioned” by women's racist and otherwise oppressive social locations (1990, 32). E. Frances White speaks of “discursive dialectics” or the reality that black

people's appeals to experience frequently challenge and "operate on the same ground" as "dominant ideolog[ies]" (1990, 79).

What *Feminist Theory* does do is put these two lines of inquiry — black women's place in intersectional theorizing and the dialectic between experience and politics — into dialogue with each other. An important lesson ultimately emerges from this dialogue: feminist debate, including debate about the merits of highlighting black women's voices in intersectional theorizing, is most productive when it avoids the "learned tendency to compare and judge" (hooks [1984] 2015, 59). hooks does not mean that intersectional theorists should embrace the flawed notion that all women have the same experience of oppression. She argues, instead, that feminist theorists can and should recognize that there is more than one optimal way forward when it comes to deciphering how, if at all, to prioritize black women's voices in intersectional scholarship (59). To do otherwise, hooks rightly cautions, is to perpetuate the patriarchal mantra that women's "relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience" or, more bluntly, that "we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another" (43). For this invaluable insight regarding *how* to debate the politics of experience, today's intersectional theorists owe hooks an additional debt of gratitude.

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## *Reflecting on the Power of hooks*

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I have read and greatly enjoyed bell hooks's classic *Feminist Theory: From Marginal to Center* many times now. I found it browsing the stacks as an undergraduate and returned to it in graduate school. Her statement regarding Betty Friedan so expertly summarized the conflict between black and white feminists, so well captured a conflict whose roots lay in the intersectionality of patriarchal power and its attendant privileges, as well as the failures of recognition those power differences occasioned, that I used part of it as an epigraph in my dissertation and later book, *Intimate Justice* (Threadcraft 2018). It bears repeating:

[Friedan] did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes . . . She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife. (hooks [1984] 2015, 1–2)

Still as powerful as ever.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to return to the book now, on the occasion of its 35th anniversary. Its insights are as powerful for me now as they were for me at 18. In fact, they are perhaps more powerful for me now, as someone who has taken up hooks's call, who teaches and advances feminist theory.

On this rereading, I was struck by several things. The first is very straightforward: I should teach a class on bell hooks. It is the best and