

one another. Let's face it, so many black males and females have suffered mental abandonment, and more than police brutality, that's the core for many of us of our trauma. Betrayal is always about abandonment. And many of us have been emotionally abandoned. These are the wounds we have yet to correctly attend to so both black children and biracial children can have the opportunity to truly care for themselves in a way that's optimal for all.

Yancy: How are your Buddhist practices and your feminist practices mutually reinforcing?

hooks: Well, I would have to say my Buddhist Christian practice challenges me, as does feminism. Buddhism continues to inspire me because there is such an emphasis on practice. What are you doing? Right livelihood, right action. We are back to that self-interrogation that is so crucial. It's funny that you would link Buddhism and feminism, because I think one of the things that I'm grappling with at this stage of my life is how much of the core grounding in ethical-spiritual values has been the solid ground on which I stood. That ground is from both Buddhism and Christianity, and then feminism that helped me as a young woman to find and appreciate that ground. The spirituality piece came up for me in my love of Beat poetry. I came to Buddhism through the Beats, through Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac – they all sort of gave me this other space of groundedness.

I talk about spirituality more now than ever before, because I see my students suffering more than ever before, especially women students who feel like so much is expected of them. They've got to be the equals of men, but then they've got to be submissive if they are heteronormative, they have to find a partner. It's just so much demand that has led them to depression, to addiction, or suicide. And it's amazing how spirituality grounds them.

Feminism does not ground me. It is the discipline that comes from spiritual practice that is the foundation of my life. If we talk about what a disciplined writer I have been and hope to continue to be, that discipline starts with a spiritual practice. It's just every day, every day, every day...

Understanding Patriarchy (2004)_____

bell hooks

Patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation. Yet most men do not use the word 'patriarchy' in everyday life. Most men never think about patriarchy – what it means, how it is created and sustained. Many men in our nation would not be able to spell the word or pronounce it correctly. The word 'patriarchy' just is not a part of their normal everyday thought or speech. Men who have heard and know the word usually associate it with women's liberation, with feminism, and therefore dismiss it as irrelevant to their own experiences. I have been standing at podiums talking about patriarchy for more than thirty years. It is a word I use daily, and men who hear me use it often ask me what I mean by it. Nothing discounts the old antifeminist projection of men as all-powerful more than their basic ignorance of a major facet of the political system that shapes and informs male identity and sense of self from birth until death. I often use the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics. Of these systems the one that we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfil these roles.

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. When my older brother and I were born with a year separating us in age, patriarchy determined how we would each be regarded by our parents. Both our parents believed in patriarchy; they had been taught patriarchal thinking through religion.

At church they had learned that God created man to rule the world

and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man. They were taught that God was male. These teachings were reinforced in every institution they encountered – schools, courthouses, clubs, sports arenas, as well as churches. Embracing patriarchal thinking, like everyone else around them, they taught it to their children because it seemed like a “natural” way to organise life.

As their daughter I was taught that it was my role to serve, to be weak, to be free from the burden of thinking, to caretake and nurture others. My brother was taught that it was his role to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategise, and plan; and to refuse to caretake or nurture others. I was taught that it was not proper for a female to be violent, that it was ‘unnatural’. My brother was taught that his value would be determined by his will to do violence (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that for a boy, enjoying violence was a good thing (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that a boy should not express feelings. I was taught that girls could and should express feelings, or at least some of them. When I responded with rage at being denied a toy, I was taught as a girl in a patriarchal household that rage was not an appropriate feminine feeling, that it should be not only not be expressed but be eradicated. When my brother responded with rage at being denied a toy, he was taught as a boy in a patriarchal household that his ability to express rage was good but that he had to learn the best setting to unleash his hostility. It was not good for him to use his rage to oppose the wishes of his parents, but later, when he grew up, he was taught that rage was permitted and that allowing rage to provoke him to violence would help him protect home and nation.

We lived in farm country, isolated from other people. Our sense of gender roles was learned from our parents, from the ways we saw them behave. My brother and I remember our confusion about gender. In reality I was stronger and more violent than my brother, which we learned quickly was bad. And he was a gentle, peaceful boy, which we learned was really bad. Although we were often confused, we knew one fact for certain: we could not be and act the way we wanted to, doing what we felt like. It was clear to us that

across class have to restore that sense of resistance in the home.

When we look at the history of anti-racist rebels among black people, so much organising happened in people’s homes. I always think about Mary McLeod Bethune: “Let’s just start the college in your living room.” Self-determination really does begin at home. We’re finding out that one of the reasons for why so much black rebel anti-racist movements failed is because they didn’t take care of the home as a site of resistance. So, you have very wounded people trying to lead movements in a world beyond the home, but they were simply not psychologically fit to lead.

Yancy: That’s an important segue to the question about your concept of ‘soul healing’ with respect to black men. What does soul healing among black men look like? And what role do you think black women play in helping to help nurture that soul healing?

hooks: Every now and then I write a book that hardly anyone pays any attention to. One such book in my life is my book on black masculinity, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. An aspect of that book that I found deeply moving is when I use the metaphor of Isis and Osiris. Osiris is attacked, and his body parts are spread all over. Isis, the stern mother, sister and lover, goes and fetches those parts and puts him back together again. That sort of metaphor of harmony and friction that can be soul-healing for black people is so real to me. Often I feel sad, because I think we are in a culture that keeps black men and women further apart from one another, rather than meeting us in that place of shared history, shared story.

I am so grateful for the black male friends in my life. Like so many professional black women, I don’t have a partner. I would like to have one, but I’ve been grateful for having conscious, caring, black male comrades and friends, who keep me from any kind of integration of black masculinity, who just keep me in this space of loving blackness.

To have that kind of bonding is precious. These are the constructive moments of our time, and they’re not televised. When Malcolm X said we have to see each other with new eyes, I think that’s where self-determination begins and how we are with

you look at the people, and you look at us, and you look at all of this media that is parading the sorrows and the mental illnesses of the white rich in our society. And it's like everybody just skips over that. Nobody would raise the question, 'why don't we pathologise the rich?' We actually believe that they suffer mental illness, and that they deserve healing. The issue for us as black people is that very few people feel that we deserve healing. Which is why we have very few systems that promote healing in our lives. The primary system that ever promoted healing in black people is the church, and we see what is going on in most churches today. They've become an extension of that material greed.

Yancy: As you shared being stopped by police, I thought of your book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, where you describe whiteness as a site of terror. Has that changed for you?

hooks: I don't think that has changed for most black people. That particular essay, *Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination*, talks about whiteness, the black imagination, and how many of us live in fear of whiteness. And I emphasise the story about the policeman because for many of us that fear of whiteness has intensified. I think that white people, for the most part, never think about black people wanting to be in black only spaces, because we do not feel safe.

In my last book, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, I really wanted to raise and problematise the question: Where do we feel safe as black people? I definitely return to the home as a place of spiritual possibility, home as a holy place.

I bought my current house from a conservative white male capitalist who lives across the street from me, and I'm so happy in my little home. I tell people, when I open the doors of my house it's like these arms come out, and they're just embracing me. I think that is part of our radical resistance to the culture of domination. I know that I'm not who he imagined in this little house. He imagined a nice white family with two kids, and I think on some level it was very hard for him to sell his house to a radical black woman, a radical black feminist woman. I think all of us, in terms of houses, have our idea, when we love our home, of who we want to be in it. But I think black folks in general

our behaviour had to follow a predetermined, gendered script. We both learned the word 'patriarchy' in our adult life, when we learned that the script that had determined what we should be, the identities we should make, was based on patriarchal values and beliefs about gender.

I was always more interested in challenging patriarchy than my brother was because it was the system that was always leaving me out of things that I wanted to be part of. In our family life of the fifties, marbles were a boy's game. My brother had inherited his marbles from men in the family; he had a tin box to keep them in. All sizes and shapes, marvellously coloured, they were to my eye the most beautiful objects. We played together with them, often with me aggressively clinging to the marble I liked best, refusing to share. When Dad was at work, our stay-at-home mom was quite content to see us playing marbles together. Yet Dad, looking at our play from a patriarchal perspective, was disturbed by what he saw. His daughter, aggressive and competitive, was a better player than his son. His son was passive; the boy did not really seem to care who won and was willing to give over marbles on demand. Dad decided that this play had to end, that both my brother and I needed to learn a lesson about appropriate gender roles.

One evening my brother was given permission by Dad to bring out the tin of marbles. I announced my desire to play and was told by my brother that "girls did not play with marbles", that it was a boy's game. This made no sense to my four- or five-year-old mind, and I insisted on my right to play by picking up marbles and shooting them. Dad intervened to tell me to stop. I did not listen. His voice grew louder and louder. Then suddenly he snatched me up, broke a board from our screen door, and began to beat me with it, telling me, "You're just a little girl. When I tell you to do something, I mean for you to do it", He beat me and he beat me, wanting me to acknowledge that I understood what I had done. His rage, his violence captured everyone's attention. Our family sat spellbound, rapt before the pornography of patriarchal violence. After this beating I was banished – forced to stay alone in the dark. Mama came into the bedroom to soothe the pain, telling me in her soft

southern voice, “I tried to warn you. You need to accept that you are just a little girl and girls can’t do what boys do.” In service to patriarchy her task was to reinforce that Dad had done the right thing by, putting me in my place, by restoring the natural social order.

I remember this traumatic event so well because it was a story told again and again within our family. No one cared that the constant retelling might trigger post-traumatic stress; the retelling was necessary to reinforce both the message and the remembered state of absolute powerlessness. The recollection of this brutal whipping of a little-girl daughter by a big strong man, served as more than just a reminder to me of my gendered place, it was a reminder to everyone watching/remembering, to all my siblings, male and female, and to our grown-woman mother that our patriarchal father was the ruler in our household. We were to remember that if we did not obey his rules, we would be punished, punished even unto death. This is the way we were experientially schooled in the art of patriarchy.

There is nothing unique or even exceptional about this experience. Listen to the voices of wounded grown children raised in patriarchal homes and you will hear different versions with the same underlying theme, the use of violence to reinforce our indoctrination and acceptance of patriarchy. In *How Can I Get Through to You?* family therapist Terrence Real tells how his sons were initiated into patriarchal thinking even as their parents worked to create a loving home in which anti-patriarchal values prevailed. He tells of how his young son Alexander enjoyed dressing as Barbie until boys playing with his older brother witnessed his Barbie persona and let him know by their gaze and their shocked, disapproving silence that his behaviour was unacceptable:

Without a shred of malevolence, the stare my son received transmitted a message. You are not to do this. And the medium that message was broadcast in was a potent emotion: shame. At three, Alexander was learning the rules. A ten-second wordless transaction was powerful enough to dissuade my son from that instant forward from what had been a favourite activity. I call such moments of induction the ‘normal traumatising’ of boys.

gendered, because the street, in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, is male, especially when it is dark. There is so much feeling of being lost that it is beyond the trauma of racism. It is the trauma of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, because poverty has become infinitely more violent than it ever was when I was a girl. You lived next door to very poor black people, but who had very joyful lives. That’s not the poverty of today.

Yancy: How is the poverty of today different?

hooks: Let’s face it, one of the things white people gave us when they gave us integration was full access to the tormenting reality of desire, and the expectation of constant consumption. So part of the difference of poverty today is this sort of world of fantasy – fantasising that you’ll win the lottery, fantasising that money will come. I always cling to Lorraine Hansberry’s mama saying in *A Raisin in the Sun*, “Since when did money become life?” I think that with the poverty of my growing up that I lived with and among, we were always made to feel like money is not what life is all about. That’s the total difference for everyone living right now, because most people in our culture believe money is everything. That is the big tie, the connecting tie to black, white, Hispanic, native people, Asian people – the greed and the materialism that we all invest in and share.

Yancy: When you make that claim, I can see some readers saying that bell is pathologising black spaces.

hooks: As I said, we have normalised mental illness in this society. So it’s not the pathologising of black spaces; it’s saying that the majority of cultural spaces in our society are infused with pathology. That’s why it’s so hard to get out of it, because it has become the culture that is being fed to us every day. None of us can escape it unless we do so by conscious living and conscious loving, and that’s become harder for everybody. I don’t have a problem stating the fact that trauma creates wounds, and most of our wounds are not healed as African-Americans. We’re not really different in that way from all the others who are wounded. Let’s face it – wounded white people frequently can cover up their wounds, because they have greater access to material power.

I find it fascinating that every day you go to the supermarket, and

mental illness. So remember that we are a culture in crisis. Our crisis is as much a spiritual crisis as it is a political crisis, and that's why Martin Luther King, Jr. was so profoundly prescient in describing how the work of love would be necessary to have a transformative impact.

Yancy: And of course, that doesn't mean that you don't find an important place in your work for rage, as in your book *Killing Rage*?

hooks: Oh, absolutely. The first time that I got to be with Thich Nhat Hanh, I had just been longing to meet him. I was like, I'm going to meet this incredibly holy man. On the day that I was going to him, every step of the way I felt that I was encountering some kind of racism or sexism. When I got to him, the first thing out of my mouth was, "I am *so angry!*" And he, of course, Mr. Calm himself, Mr. Peace, said, "Well, you know, hold on to your anger, and use it as compost for your garden." And I thought, 'Yes, yes, I can do that!' I tell that story to people all the time. I was telling him about the struggles I was having with my male partner at the time and he said, "It is O.K. to say I want to kill you, but then you need to step back from that, and remember what brought you to this person in the first place." And I think that if we think of anger as compost, we think of it as energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. It is an empowering force. If we don't think about it that way, it becomes a debilitating and destructive force.

Yancy: Since you mentioned Sandra Bland, and there are so many other cases that we can mention, how can we use the trauma that black people are experiencing, or reconfigure that trauma into compost? How can black people do that? What does that look like therapeutically, or collectively?

hooks: We have to be willing to be truthful. And to be truthful, we have to say, the problem that black people face, the trauma of white supremacy in our lives, is not limited to police brutality. That's just one aspect. I often say that the issue for young black males is the street. If you only have the streets, you encounter violence on all sides: black on black violence, the violence of addiction, and the violence of police brutality. So the question is why at this stage of our history, with so many wealthy black people, and so many gifted black people, how do we provide a place other than the streets for black males? And it is so

To indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings.

My stories took place in the fifties; the stories Real tells are recent. They all underscore the tyranny of patriarchal thinking, the power of patriarchal culture to hold us captive. Real is one of the most enlightened thinkers on the subject of patriarchal masculinity in our nation, and yet he lets readers know that he is not able to keep his boys out of patriarchy's reach. They suffer its assaults, as do all boys and girls, to a greater or lesser degree. No doubt by creating a loving home that is not patriarchal, Real at least offers his boys a choice: they can choose to be themselves or they can choose conformity with patriarchal roles. Real uses the phrase 'psychological patriarchy' to describe the patriarchal thinking common to females and males. Despite the contemporary visionary feminist thinking that makes clear that a patriarchal thinker need not be a male, most folks continue to see men as the problem of patriarchy. This is simply not the case. Women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking and action as men.

Psychotherapist John Bradshaw's clear-sighted definition of patriarchy in *Creating Love* is a useful one: "The dictionary defines 'patriarchy' as a 'social organisation marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family in both domestic and religious functions'." Patriarchy is characterised by male domination and power. He states further that "patriarchal rules still govern most of the world's religious, school systems, and family systems." Describing the most damaging of these rules, Bradshaw lists "blind obedience – the foundation upon which patriarchy stands; the repression of all emotions except fear; the destruction of individual willpower; and the repression of thinking whenever it departs from the authority figure's way of thinking". Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialised into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers. These attitudes were reinforced in schools and religious institutions.

The contemporary presence of female-headed households has led many people to assume that children in these households are not learning patriarchal values because no male is present. They

assume that men are the sole teachers of patriarchal thinking. Yet many female-headed households endorse and promote patriarchal thinking with far greater passion than two-parent households. Because they do not have an experiential reality to challenge false fantasies of gender roles, women in such households are far more likely to idealise the patriarchal male role and patriarchal men than are women who live with patriarchal men every day. We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognise patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system. Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together.

Clearly we cannot dismantle a system as long as we engage in collective denial about its impact on our lives. Patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence. We hear the most about sexist violence in public discourses about rape and abuse by domestic partners. But the most common forms of patriarchal violence are those that take place in the home between patriarchal parents and children. The point of such violence is usually to reinforce a dominator model, in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission.

Keeping males and females from telling the truth about what happens to them in families is one way patriarchal culture is maintained. A great majority of individuals enforce an unspoken rule in the culture as a whole that demands we keep the secrets of patriarchy, thereby protecting the rule of the father. This rule of silence is upheld when the culture refuses everyone easy access even to the word 'patriarchy'. Most children do not learn what to call this system of institutionalised gender roles, so rarely do we name it in everyday speech. This silence promotes denial. And how can we organise to challenge and change a system that cannot be named?

It is no accident that feminists began to use the word 'patriarchy' to replace the more commonly used 'male chauvinism' and 'sexism'. These courageous voices wanted men and women to become more

every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love, and that includes teaching. I don't do a lot of teaching these days. I am semi-retired. Because, like any act of love, it takes a lot of your energy.

I was just talking with a neighbour about what it feels like to be working at a need-based college like Berea, where none of our students pay tuition, and many of them come from the hills of Appalachia. We often get discouraged anytime we feel that our college isn't living up to its history of integration and of racial inclusion. But then we'd see we have students who are doing such amazing things, from the hills of Virginia, or Tennessee. You just know, I am right where I am meant to be, doing what I should be doing, and giving and receiving the love that comes anytime we do that work well.

Yancy: You've conceptualised love as the opposite of estrangement. Can you say something about that?

hooks: When we engage love as action, you can't act without connecting. I often think of that phrase, *only connect*. In terms of white supremacy right now for instance, the police stopped me a few weeks ago here in Berea, because I was doing something wrong. I initially felt fear, and I was thinking about the fact that in all of my 60-some years of my life in this country, I have never felt afraid of policemen before, but I feel afraid now. He was just total sweetness. And yet I thought, what a horrible change in our society that that level of estrangement has taken place that was not there before.

I know that the essential experience of black men and women has always been different, but from the time I was a girl to now, I never thought the police were my enemy. Yet, what black woman witnessing the incredible abuse of Sandra Bland can't shake in her boots if she's being stopped by the police? When I was watching that video, I was amazed the police didn't shoot her on the spot! White supremacist white people are crazy.

I used to talk about patriarchy as a mental illness of disordered desire, but white supremacy is equally a serious and profound mental illness, and it leads people to do completely and utterly insane things. I think one of the things that is going on in our society is the normalisation of mental illness, and the normalisation of white supremacy, and the evocation and the spreading of this is part of that

hooks: First of all, I live in a city of 12,000 people where most of them don't have a clue about who bell hooks is for the most part, or where someone asks "Is bell hooks a person?" There is humility in the life that I lead, because one thing about having my given name, Gloria Jean, which is such a great Appalachian hillbilly name, is that I'm not walking around in my daily life usually as bell hooks. I'm walking around in the dailiness of my life as just the ordinary Gloria Jean. That's changing a bit in the little town that I live in because more of me as a thinker, writer and artist is coming out into the world of the town that I live in.

I think that I've been coming out more and more in the fact that the work that I'm writing is about spirituality, because one of the central aspects that has kept me grounded in my life has been spirituality. Growing up, when my mom used to tell me, "You're really smart, but you're not better than anyone else," I used to think, 'Why does she go on about that?' And, of course, now I see why. It was to keep me grounded and to keep me respecting the different ways of knowing and the knowledges of other people, and not thinking 'Oh, I am so smart', which I think can happen to many well-known intellectuals.

I always kind of chuckle at people labelling me a public intellectual. I chuckle because people used to say, "How have you written so much?" and I'd say, "By not having a life." There is nothing public about the energy, the discipline and solitude it takes to produce so much writing. I think of public intellectuals as very different, because I think that they're airing their work for that public engagement. Really, in all the years of my writing that was not my intention. It was to produce theory that people could use. I have this phrase that I use, 'working with the work'. So if somebody comes up to me, and they have one of those bell hooks books that's abused and battered, and every page is underlined, I know they've been working with the work. And that's where it is for me.

Yancy: Is there a connection between teaching as a space of healing and your understanding of love?

hooks: Well, I believe whole-heartedly that the only way out of domination is love, and the only way into really being able to connect with others, and to know how to be, is to be participating in

aware of the way patriarchy affects us all. In popular culture the word itself was hardly used during the heyday of contemporary feminism. Anti-male activists were no more eager than their sexist male counterparts to emphasise the system of patriarchy and the way it works. For to do so would have automatically exposed the notion that men were all-powerful and women powerless, that all men were oppressive and women always and only victims. By placing the blame for the perpetuation of sexism solely on men, these women could maintain their own allegiance to patriarchy, their own lust for power. They masked their longing to be dominators by taking on the mantle of victimhood.

Like many visionary radical feminists I challenged the misguided notion, put forward by women who were simply fed up with male exploitation and oppression, that men were 'the enemy'. As early as 1984 I included a chapter with the title *Men: Comrades in Struggle* in my book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* urging advocates of feminist politics to challenge any rhetoric which placed the sole blame for perpetuating patriarchy and male domination onto men:

Separatist ideology encourages women to ignore the negative impact of sexism on male personhood. It stresses polarisation between the sexes. According to Joy Justice, separatists believe that there are "two basic perspectives" on the issue of naming the victims of sexism: "There is the perspective that men oppress women. And there is the perspective that people are people, and we are all hurt by rigid sex roles."...both perspectives accurately describe our predicament. Men do oppress women. People are hurt by rigid sexist role patterns, These two realities coexist. Male oppression of women cannot be excused by the recognition that there are ways men are hurt by rigid sexist roles. Feminist activists should acknowledge that hurt, and work to change it – it exists. It does not erase or lessen male responsibility for supporting and perpetuating their power under patriarchy to exploit and oppress women in a manner far more grievous than the serious psychological stress and emotional pain caused by male conformity to rigid sexist role patterns.

Throughout this essay I stressed that feminist advocates collude in the pain of men wounded by patriarchy when they falsely represent

men as always and only powerful, as always and only gaining privileges from their blind obedience to patriarchy. I emphasised that patriarchal ideology brainwashes men to believe that their domination of women is beneficial when it is not:

Often feminist activists affirm this logic when we should be constantly naming these acts as expressions of perverted power relations, general lack of control of one's actions, emotional powerlessness, extreme irrationality, and in many cases, outright insanity. Passive male absorption of sexist ideology enables men to falsely interpret this disturbed behaviour positively. As long as men are brainwashed to equate violent domination and abuse of women with privilege, they will have no understanding of the damage done to themselves or to others, and no motivation to change.

Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy, to be disloyal to the patriarchal parent, be that parent female or male.

The man who has been my primary bond for more than twelve years was traumatised by the patriarchal dynamics in his family of origin. When I met him he was in his twenties. While his formative years had been spent in the company of a violent, alcoholic dad, his circumstances changed when he was twelve and he began to live alone with his mother. In the early years of our relationship he talked openly about his hostility and rage toward his abusing dad. He was not interested in forgiving him or understanding the circumstances that had shaped and influenced his dad's life, either in his childhood or in his working life as a military man.

In the early years of our relationship he was extremely critical of male domination of women and children. Although he did not use the word 'patriarchy', he understood its meaning and he opposed it. His gentle, quiet manner often led folks to ignore him, counting him among the weak and the powerless. By the age of thirty he began to assume a more macho persona, embracing the dominator model that he had once critiqued. Donning the mantle of patriarch, he gained greater respect and visibility. More women were drawn to him. He was

this stuff, it just reminds you how incredibly vital this history of struggle has been towards allowing you and I to be in the state of privilege that we live within today.

Yancy: That point hits home, especially as I think about my own intellectual identity and yet often fail to think about the privilege that comes with it.

hooks: I am a total intellectual. I tell people that intellectual work is the laboratory that I go into every day. Without all of those people engaged in civil rights struggles, I would not be here in this laboratory. I mean, how many black women have had the good fortune to write more than 30 books? When I wake up at four or five in the morning, I do my prayers and meditations, and then I have what I call my 'study hours'. I try to read a book a day, a nonfiction book, and then I get to read total trash for the rest of the day. That's luxury, that's privilege of a high order – the privilege to think critically, and then the privilege to be able to act on what you know.

Yancy: Absolutely. You've talked about how theory can function as a place of healing. Can you say more about that?

hooks: I always start with children. Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them. I think that theory is essentially a way to make sense of the world; as a gifted child growing up in a dysfunctional family where giftedness was not appreciated, what held me above water was the idea of thinking through, "Why are Mom and Dad the way they are?" And those are questions that are at the heart of critical thinking. And that's why I think critical thinking and theory can be such a source of healing. It moves us forward. And, of course, I don't know about other thinkers and writers, but I have the good fortune every day of my life to have somebody contacting me, either on the streets or by mail, telling me about how my work has changed their life, how it has enabled them to go forward. And what greater gift to be had as a thinker-theorist, than that?

Yancy: How do you prevent yourself from being seduced by that? I think that there is that temptation by intellectuals/scholars, who are well known, to be seduced into a state of narcissism. How do you resist that?

and says, 'Look, what you're pushing, the ideology, is all messed up. You've got to shift your perspective'. Feminism made that paradigm shift, though not without hostility, not without some women feeling we were forcing race on them. This change still amazes me.

Yancy: What should we do in our daily lives to combat, in that phrase of yours, the power and influence of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What can be done on the proverbial ground?

hooks: I live in a small, predominantly white town in the Bible Belt. Rather than saying, 'What would Jesus do?' I always think, 'What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?' Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, small and large, build a beloved community. As a Buddhist Christian, I also think of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's saying, "Let's throw this pebble into the water, it may not go far in the beginning, but it will ripple out." So, every day, I'm challenging myself, 'What are you doing, bell, for the creation of the beloved community?' Because that's the underground, local, insistence that I be a fundamental part of the world that I'm in. I've been to the Farmer's Market, I've been to the church bazaar this morning. I really push myself to relate to people, that is, people that I might not feel as comfortable relating to. There are many Kentucky hillbilly white persons who look at me with contempt. They cannot turn me around. I am doing the same thing as those civil rights activists, those black folk and those white folk who sat in at those diners and who marched.

It's about humanisation. And I can't think of another way to imagine how we're going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it's not through the will to humanise. Personally, I draw incredible strength from the images of black people and white people in social movements. I personally did not think *Selma* was a great film, but the strength that I gained from the film was thinking about all of those people, those white folks who see *Selma* and say, 'My God, this is unjust! Let's go do our part'. And it's awesome when we're called. There are many times in this life of mine when I ask myself, "What are you willing to give your life for, bell? When are you willing to get out in the streets knowing that you're risking your health?" And if those older black women who were there in Selma, Alabama, can do

noticed more in public spheres. His criticism of male domination ceased. And indeed he began to mouth patriarchal rhetoric, saying the kind of sexist stuff that would have appalled him in the past.

These changes in his thinking and behaviour were triggered by his desire to be accepted and affirmed in a patriarchal workplace and rationalised by his desire to get ahead. His story is not unusual. Boys brutalised and victimised by patriarchy more often than not become patriarchal, embodying the abusive patriarchal masculinity that they once clearly recognised as evil. Few men brutally abused as boys in the name of patriarchal maleness courageously resist the brainwashing and remain true to themselves. Most males conform to patriarchy in one way or another.

Indeed, radical feminist critique of patriarchy has practically been silenced in our culture. It has become a subcultural discourse available only to well-educated elites. Even in those circles, using the word 'patriarchy' is regarded as passé. Often in my lectures when I use the phrase 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' to describe our nation's political system, audiences laugh. No one has ever explained why accurately naming this system is funny. The laughter is itself a weapon of patriarchal terrorism. It functions as a disclaimer, discounting the significance of what is being named. It suggests that the words themselves are problematic and not the system they describe. I interpret this laughter as the audience's way of showing discomfort with being asked to ally themselves with an anti-patriarchal disobedient critique. This laughter reminds me that if I dare to challenge patriarchy openly, I risk not being taken seriously.

Citizens in this nation fear challenging patriarchy even as they lack overt awareness that they are fearful, so deeply embedded in our collective unconscious are the rules of patriarchy. I often tell audiences that if we were to go door-to-door asking if we should end male violence against women, most people would give their unequivocal support. Then if you told them we can only stop male violence against women by ending male domination, by eradicating patriarchy, they would begin to hesitate, to change their position. Despite the many gains of contemporary feminist

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aspect of identity that really matters, that domination only came into the world because of rape. Then we had so many race-oriented folks who were saying, "Race is the most important thing. We don't even need to be talking about class or gender." So for me, that phrase always reminds me of a global context, of the context of class, of empire, of capitalism, of racism and of patriarchy. Those things are all linked — an interlocking system.

Yancy: I've heard you speak many times and I noticed that you do so with a very keen sense of humour. What is the role of humour in your work?

hooks: We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humour. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humourless, they fail. Humour is essential to the integrative balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community. For example, I love to be in conversation with Cornel West. We always go high and we go low, and we always bring the joyful humour in. The last talk he and I gave together, many people were upset because we were silly together. But I consider it a high holy calling that we can be humorous together. How many times do we see an African-American man and an African-American woman talking together, critiquing one another, and yet having delicious, humorous delight? It's a miracle.

Yancy: What is your view of the feminist movement today, and how has your relationship to it changed over time?

hooks: My militant commitment to feminism remains strong, and the main reason is that feminism has been the contemporary social movement that has most embraced self-interrogation. When we, women of colour, began to tell white women that females were not a homogenous group, that we had to face the reality of racial difference, many white women stepped up to the plate. I'm a feminist in solidarity with white women today for that reason, because I saw these women grow in their willingness to open their minds and change the whole direction of feminist thought, writing and action. This continues to be one of the most remarkable, awesome aspects of the contemporary feminist movement. The left has not done this, radical black men have not done this, where someone comes in

and hip who want to be down! They're not even a sign of cool for me. When I broached this on stage with Cornel, he seemed to be put off by the question and so was the audience. I was not embracing a rhetoric that suggested black kids should be looking at the man in the suit and not the man in the leather coat as cool, as a role model. I was suggesting that the man in the suit might need to change to hold our interest – to capture our imagination. The spirit of transgression that is so central to both my intellectual practice and my political practice is much more tied-in with what people like Queen Latifah and Ice T are saying than with what other academics are saying.

These are exciting times. I have this deep belief in destiny, so I'm trying to live with what is my destiny here in New York. This is the last place on earth that I would ever have imagined myself living. I feel driven here by forces beyond my control. But I am excited to see whether I can, in conjunction and collaboration with other people, have New York City be more a place where some transgressively radical open critical thought and artistic production can emerge. That kind of truly avant-garde revolutionary cultural production will not happen if we don't begin to theorise it into existence as well, if we can't see that theory can be a catalyst for artistic practice and vice versa. It is that mutual interplay that might bring the element of risk and sacrifice back into our artistic and cultural practice ♣

Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness_____

Interview by George Yancy

From *The Stone*, 2015

George Yancy: Over the years you have used the expression “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to describe the power structure underlying the social order. Why tie those terms together as opposed to stressing any one of them in isolation?

bell hooks: We can't begin to understand the nature of domination if we don't understand how these systems connect with one another. Significantly, this phrase has always moved me because it doesn't value one system over another. For so many years in the feminist movement, women were saying that gender is the only

Until we can collectively acknowledge the damage patriarchy causes and the suffering it creates, we cannot address male pain. We cannot demand for men the right to be whole, to be givers and sustainers of life. Obviously some patriarchal men are reliable and even benevolent caretakers and providers, but still they are imprisoned by a system that undermines their mental health.

Patriarchy promotes insanity. It is at the root of the psychological ills troubling men in our nation. Nevertheless there is no mass concern for the plight of men. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi includes very little discussion of patriarchy:

“Ask feminists to diagnose men's problems and you will often get a very clear explanation: men are in crisis because women are properly challenging male dominance. Women are asking men to share the public reins and men can't bear it. Ask anti-feminists and you will get a diagnosis that is, in one respect, similar. Men are troubled, many conservative pundits say, because women have gone far beyond their demands for equal treatment and are now trying to take power and control away from men...The underlying message: men cannot be men, only eunuchs, if they are not in control. Both the feminist and anti-feminist views are rooted in a peculiarly modern American perception that to be a man means to be at the controls and at all times to feel yourself in control.”

Faludi never interrogates the notion of control. She never considers that the notion that men were somehow in control, in power, and satisfied with their lives before contemporary feminist movement is false.

Patriarchy as a system has denied males access to full emotional well-being, which is not the same as feeling rewarded, successful, or powerful because of one's capacity to assert control over others. To truly address male pain and male crisis we must as a nation be willing to expose the harsh reality that patriarchy has damaged men in the past and continues to damage them in the present. If patriarchy were truly rewarding to men, the violence and addiction in family life that is so all-pervasive would not exist. This violence was not created by feminism. If patriarchy were rewarding, the overwhelming dissatisfaction most men feel in

their work lives – a dissatisfaction extensively documented in the work of Studs Terkel and echoed in Faludi's treatise – would not exist.

In many ways *Stiffed* was yet another betrayal of American men because Faludi spends so much time trying not to challenge patriarchy that she fails to highlight the necessity of ending patriarchy if we are to liberate men. Rather she writes:

"Instead of wondering why men resist women's struggle for a freer and healthier life, I began to wonder why men refrain from engaging in their own struggle. Why, despite a crescendo of random tantrums, have they offered no methodical, reasoned response to their predicament: Given the untenable and insulting nature of the demands placed on men to prove themselves in our culture, why don't men revolt?...Why haven't men responded to the series of betrayals in their own lives – to the failures of their fathers to make good on their promises – with some thing coequal to feminism?"

Note that Faludi does not dare risk either the ire of feminist females by suggesting that men can find salvation in feminist movement or rejection by potential male readers who are solidly anti-feminist by suggesting that they have something to gain from engaging feminism.

So far in our nation visionary feminist movement is the only struggle for justice that emphasises the need to end patriarchy. No mass body of women has challenged patriarchy and neither has any group of men come together to lead the struggle. The crisis facing men is not the crisis of masculinity, it is the crisis of patriarchal masculinity. Until we make this distinction clear, men will continue to fear that any critique of patriarchy represents a threat. Distinguishing political patriarchy, which he sees as largely committed to ending sexism, therapist Terrence Real makes clear that the patriarchy damaging us all is embedded in our psyches:

"Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed 'masculine' and 'feminine' in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a 'dance of contempt', a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation. It is the unacknowledged

participatory. The cultural critic stands so much at a distance from what he or she writes about. That distance is always dangerous in that it has the possibility of reinscribing the status quo, co-opting and appropriating in the interest of making the status quo appear more chic, more open than it finally ever really is.

Chua: I wonder also how you see the function of groups like The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, whose work on very obvious levels challenges that kind of status quo, and yet has been met with so much resistance in terms of the marketplace.

hooks: I follow their work and like it and other groups like Arrested Development. I interviewed Speech from Arrested Development and I talked to a lot of young black women about him. They said, "Yeah, but after awhile their music is just boring". Then I think we do get into the tension around notions of funkiness and getting down and being down.

I think a perpetual tension for any of us who engage in any kind of revolutionary political visions of transformation is how do we keep the funk? We never talk about what if people aren't drawn by the sexism and the misogyny, but are instead drawn by a sense of recklessness, a willingness to transcend limits and to call out shit graphically. Yet we in our progressive visions don't account for those yearnings to be on the edge. I felt that lust when I was young and I feel it now. How can we have some models of radicalism that also incorporate what it is to transgress in a manner that is expressive, colourful, exciting, and even dangerous? What allows me to hold to whatever sweetness I may find in a word like 'bitch', that doesn't translate into some subjugation of women?

One of the things that I believe is that this kind of theory cannot be done in the same old privatised way. It has to emerge from collaborative exchange, from border-crossing of an Ice Cube and a bell hooks trying to jam it out together and jamming one another. Or for me saying to Cornel West, "I'm sorry Cornel, young black men are not going to say, 'Gee, I really want to look like that guy in those three piece suits.'" (laughter) That's not saying that we shouldn't be able to embrace those suits as some sign of cool, but the fact is they are no sign of cool to the young

musicians, particularly the men who were so groundbreaking in their musical crossing of boundaries, tended to be very narrow in their thinking about gender and patriarchy. Miles Davis is such a good example of that because he vocalised his reactionary perspectives on gender. No one talks about the fact that in all these cases of sexual aggression with black public figures, like Tupac Shakur, the woman has been black. The cultural response would be very different to these events if the women were white.

Black men do victimise black women but that victimisation is coded as a response to racism, and not as, 'let's talk about racism and what black men get from patriarchy'. What do black men get through this rhetoric of nation, in terms of their power in domestic space? That's not a discourse that white culture is fascinated with, because they don't give a fuck about what happens in black domestic space.

Chua: You've talked about how figures like Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube disrupt essential notions of black masculinity. Your understanding of gangsta rap is very different from the dominant feminist line.

hooks: People presume that because I'm a feminist thinker they know I'm gonna trash rap, especially gangsta rap. I can challenge the sexism and misogyny of it, but I can embrace the rage that is implicit in it and the sense of powerlessness that undergirds it. It is such a challenge to be able to see that you can not identify with something about individuals and still have parts of them that you might embrace and engage.

When I interviewed Ice Cube, he was insisting on the power of the black father in the home. I was yelling, "Are you really trying to tell me that if you have unloving black fathers in the home, we're going to have a generation of healthy kids?" Finally he acknowledged that just having a father present who's not caring is really not going to produce some healthy children. That's the kind of exchange that we should be trying to bring to the floor and not these simplistic representations of sexism and misogyny. It's so hard because these men both disrupt and reinscribe at the same time.

One has to be vigilant in your response but that means you have to be engaged and I think that so much cultural criticism is non-

paradigm of relationships that has suffused Western civilisation generation after generation, deforming both sexes, and destroying the passionate bond between them."

By highlighting psychological patriarchy, we see that everyone is implicated and we are freed from the misperception that men are the enemy. To end patriarchy we must challenge both its psychological and its concrete manifestations in daily life. There are folks who are able to critique patriarchy but unable to act in an anti-patriarchal manner.

To end male pain, to respond effectively to male crisis, we have to name the problem. We have to both acknowledge that the problem is patriarchy and work to end patriarchy. Terrence Real offers this valuable insight: "The reclamation of wholeness is a process even more fraught for men than it has been for women, more difficult and more profoundly threatening to the culture at large." If men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. We must all change 🌐

Dare to be Holistic

Interview by Randy Lowens

From *Northeastern Anarchist* #15, 2011.

In June of 2009 bell hooks agreed to be interviewed. We met at a local coffee shop and, over bagels and espresso drinks, discussed her books, politics and thoughts on recent events such as the economic downturn. I found her as forthright in person as on the page and with a subtle wit not always apparent (to me) in her writing. For example, after the interview we were approached by a local lawyer who was curious what publication she was being interviewed for. She cut her eyes at me and said, "Tell the man who the interview is for". Upon learning I was an anarchist, the lawyer mouthed familiar clichés about disorganisation. hooks, a hint of a grin playing at the corners of her mouth, responded, "Yes, yes, it's all about license for the individual!"

Randy: We're interviewing bell hooks, author of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* and numerous other titles. You're known to be a prolific author: do you have a personal favourite? Is there any one title that someone unfamiliar with your work should read first?

hooks: My work is so eclectic; it spans such a broad spectrum. I guess if you look at my children's books, I like *Be Boy Buzz* the best. If you look at the love books, I like *All About Love* the best. If you look at the theory books, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* is one of my favourites. It's a good thing not to have to choose one. I think part of Western metaphysical dualism is, we're always being asked to choose one over the other. I'm lucky. I think it's good that I have a body of work that addresses different things in different ways.

Randy: You don't capitalise your name? Why is that?

hooks: When the feminist movement was at its zenith in the late 60's and early 70's, there was a lot of moving away from the idea of the person. It was: let's talk about the ideas behind the work, and the people matter less. It was kind of a gimmicky thing, but lots of feminist women were doing it. Many of us took the names of our female ancestors – bell hooks is my maternal great grandmother – to honour them and debunk the notion that we were these unique, exceptional women. We wanted to say, actually, we were the products of the women who'd gone before us.

Randy: The books of yours I'm most familiar with – the two I cited – are a work of political theory and, the other, a work of cultural criticism. Do you see those as distinctly different? Is there any clear line between the cultural and the political?

hooks: I would say one difference with the political writings, whether about feminism or class, is that the intent is to change how people think of a certain political reality; whereas with cultural criticism, the goal is to illuminate something that is already there. For example, the contemporary movie *Crash* I thought was a very weak statement about race and class. That was already there in the film. What I did in having a conversation about it was illuminate why it was a weak analysis of race and class. 'It's people; we're all racist'. That's just

are perhaps portrayed as the most oversexed group in this society. How has that affected our actual sex lives? Do we exist in a culture where nothing that we can do sexually is equal to the hype? We have uncovered work that suggests Martin Luther King fucked all the time, but we can't find one article that would talk about what the place of sexuality was in his life. To what extent did the enormous sacrifices that he made as a public persona influence his compulsive sexual behaviour? Did we see any public discourse about whether Malcolm X had or did not have homosexual relations? If this is our shining black prince, our manhood, does this open up the possibility for a revolution in how we think about black masculinity?

Nor do we have a lot of complex writing about black resistance to racism and our simultaneous embrace of American national identity, which we clearly saw exposed during the Gulf War. I think the issues of nationhood are much more central to black folk in Europe because they are minorities in the countries that they live in and they haven't had the legacies of resistance that we have here. When people evoke Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" they completely erase that radical critique that is present in sermons and speeches like "A Testament of Hope" wherein he suggests we must move beyond a national identity to a profound critique of imperialism and global militarism. That's the Martin Luther King that will not be taught to every little school kid.

Chua: You've often juxtaposed the trope of nation and family with the more fluid notion of community.

hooks: It suggests something that can be made and remade wherever you might be. Communities of resistance suggest something that has to be explained, while nation and family already conjure up specific kinds of images and forms of bonding for people. There's a tremendous mounting fascism in this culture and it's very scary to see it finding such presence in expression of African American life.

Basically the educated body of black people who are cultural workers, writers, artists, musicians, etc. tend to be deeply invested in bourgeois values on all levels. People evoke jazz as expressive of these far-reaching radical oppositions to norms, but they really haven't been carried over in habits of daily life. Those very jazz

about how he worked for thirty some years and was never absent from his job. One of the things that I tell my dad all the time is that the discipline I have as a writer is not anything that I learned at Stanford University. I got it from this working class background where disciplined work was really valued. My dad kept using the phrase “marvellously blessed”. To think that a black man working in the South at a ‘menial job’ would reflect back on that experience and declare that he feels marvellously blessed that he was not absent from his job in thirty some years... I was touched. He was speaking in the vernacular of our region and I thought about how much I’d lost that capacity because I’m not there enough.

There is a beauty to vernacular speech and culture in America. Mass media is one of the forces that aggressively works to wipe out that cultural and regional specificity.

Chua: When I came in this afternoon, we were talking about the differences between black British thought and black American thought. How do you think these issues are played out across the Atlantic? Why has black Britain been able to produce the kind of radical cultural work and theory that we here in America haven’t?

hooks: Because the material rewards are not there in British culture, there’s less of a temptation to sell out in the same way. I’m not acting like I think black British people have some kind of integrity that is different. But the integrity is challenged here by the existence of a structure of reward. I feel more linked to black British thinkers right now, because a lot of the choices that I make in what I write and how I write it actually prevent me from reaping those rewards. I’m still struggling both politically, morally, and ethically to be an independent thinker.

There is a fear of radical openness that’s making black social and critical thought infinitely more homogeneous than we should ever want it to be. Why do we have to be threatened by the notion of a different voice or a dissenting voice? I feel this a lot lately around issues of censorship and what I want to be able to talk about in the future.

I really want to write in a complex way about black sexuality and I feel that there’s tremendous resistance to a discussion of black sexuality that does not reproduce certain norms. In terms of representation, we

another bullshit way of people not wanting to name the power and institutionalised strength of white supremacy. We all may have prejudices, but we’re not all part of a system that reinforces, reinvents and reaffirms itself every day of our lives, systemically.

Randy: You mentioned your children’s books. I think last time we spoke, you were preparing to publish a book, *Happy to be Nappy*?

hooks: *Happy to be Nappy* was my first children’s book. I think when we saw each other I was in the production of *Grump Groan Growl* which was about anger.

Randy: I read that one to my daughter, by the way.

hooks: Oh, yeah?

Randy: Do you have anything to say about the distinction? Are these books in any way political? We have a political audience.

hooks: They absolutely are. Both books were written to counter racism, patriarchy or both. Especially *Be Boy Buzz* was written to say, ‘We don’t really live in a culture that loves boys or loves children, and we don’t encourage boys to be whole’. I wanted to write a non-patriarchal book that would proclaim the love of boys.

Randy: You’re known, especially within our circles, for popularising intersectional theory as opposed to reductionisms. Can you say a little bit about how intersectional theory plays out in practice? That is to say, your typical class reductionist at least has a priority; a Black Nationalist has something to prioritise. How do you practice intersectionalism?

hooks: Intersectionality allow us to focus on what is most important at a given point in time. I used to say to people, if you’re in a domestic situation where the man is violent, patriarchy and male domination – even though you understand it intersectionally – you focus, you highlight that dimension of it, if that’s what is needed to change the situation. I think that, again, if we move away from either/or thinking, and if we think, okay, every day of my life that I walk out of my house I am a combination of race, gender, class, sexual preference and religion or what have you, what gets foregrounded? I think it’s crazy for us to think that people don’t understand what’s being foregrounded in their lives at a given point in time. Like right now, for many Americans,

class is being foregrounded like never before because of the economic situation. It doesn't mean that race doesn't matter, or gender doesn't matter, but it means that right now in many people's lives, in the lives of my own family members, people are losing jobs, insurance. I was teasing my brother that he was penniless, homeless, jobless. Right now in his life, racism isn't the central highlighting force: it's the world of work and economics. It doesn't mean that he isn't influenced by racism, but when he wakes up in the morning the thing that's driving his world is really issues of class, economics and power as they articulate themselves. I guess I wish we could talk about: what does it mean to have a politics of intersectionality that also privileges what form of domination is most oppressing us at a given moment in time.

Randy: I'm reminded of Murray Bookchin and the analogy of society to ecology. Were you at all influenced by that?

hooks: No.

Randy: Do you have any opinions of the modern day anarchist movement, globally or here in the USA? It's almost nonexistent here in the South.

hooks: Sadly, anarchy has gotten such a bad name. We don't really see much evidence of it because people associate it with reckless abandon, which we both know it's not. I think we have to talk about educating the people for critical consciousness about what anarchy is. I would also say that, in practice, many more Americans are anarchists than would ever use that term.

Randy: It's clear from your books that you oppose capitalism. Do you think capitalism can be reformed, or must it be overthrown? Do you consider yourself a revolutionary in that sense?

hooks: I see myself, in terms of the question of capitalism, as I would support democratic socialism over a capitalist system, because any approach... or participatory economics, which is another great model that people like Michael Albert are putting out there... any system that encourages us to think about interdependency, and to be able to use the world's resources in a wiser way, for the good of the whole, would be better for the

religion but fall back on the construction of more private spiritual practice that enables us to think about issues like sacrifice and service. Growing up, we were taught to believe we existed to service the cause of racial uplift and ending white supremacy.

The young blacks that I teach today are into that kind of liberalism that says, 'I'm mainly here to service myself first and if I want to join some radical cause I can'. For many years I wouldn't have been able to even think of improving myself without heightening the freedom and well-being of my community. It really was entering white institutions of higher learning that disrupted that vision of living to serve the community and the cause of racial uplift.

Where is liberal individualism most taught, but in academic institutions? They exist to produce the privileged classes. To make them come into being it's very important to have people repudiate any ethic of communalism in favour of privatised thinking.

Chua: I wonder how much of that ethic of communalism comes from being part of a rural, or even a suburban, community. Do you think your rural background has informed a lot of your critical practice?

hooks: Kentucky is one of the states that is very feudal in a lot of ways. Coming from there carries some of the really negative aspects of a feudal culture, but it also was a world that really did believe in certain kinds of values. The poor are consistently represented in this culture's mass media as having no values or ethics, yet where I grew up there was no correlation between poverty and lack of integrity. Poor backwoods Kentucky folk, my people had a relationship to loyalty and honour, a whole ethical dimension that was completely divorced from materiality.

I find it amazing that across race and class, we live in a country that's very determined by geographic location. We have very few voices that come to us from rural experience in America. The educated people from those regions actually learn to translate away from our vernacular cultures in the interest of getting some play and consideration in the larger public world. I was talking to my dad, who's in his mid-seventies and is doing poorly. He was going on

have an opportunity of being represented if you dare to put forth some of the labour. I feel like I labour for things. A lot of times it is a sacrifice. I have this deep feeling that the meaning of sacrifice has been really lost in this culture. When I look back at the civil rights struggle, I am awed by people's willingness to sacrifice personal comfort and well-being to make some changes.

What's sad is that significance of sacrifice seems to be solely embedded in religion in our society, because religion has not had the force for young people that it had twenty years ago in many of our lives. Look at Malcolm X. Everyone who is pimping him for their own opportunistic gains doesn't talk about the fact that this man lived in relative poverty as he tried to spread his mission. How many of us are committed to living on the edge in that way? I'm certainly not. I'm working hard not to have to live that way, even as I want to hold to the principle of sacrifice and be ready when the moment comes to do what needs to be done to end domination.

Chua: As you said, the idea of sacrifice is so caught up in religious belief, there is a tendency to oversimplify it. How do you strategise something like sacrifice?

hooks: Part of why so many of us came out of radical '60s politics and jumped into Eastern religion was because, more than Christianity, it evoked a balance. How do you balance that commitment to social change where you don't just burn out and give yourself over to an almost negative ethic of sacrifice? How do you create inner harmony and balance that allows you to sacrifice when necessary and to withhold when necessary? I can remember how deeply affected I was by the Buddhist nun in Vietnam who set herself on fire in the interest of protesting the war. How far do we go and what do we give?

I still find religion to be the place that tempers my spirit. A friend and I have battled around the whole question, 'Are there other locations where these values of moral discipline, integrity and sacrifice can be taught?' We can teach those ethics to young children without teaching them religion, but it's hard to know how to bring an ethical dimension into political work and artistic practice in a culture that is so obscenely hedonistic. That's why people like me might not fall back on organised

world than capitalism. Capitalism is fucking up the planet, we know that. But let's say, imperialism and capitalism together... I mean let's face it, war in its essence is another form of capitalism. Wars make people rich – and they make a lot of people poor, and they take a lot of people's lives away from them. We know that so much of the war that is happening is the attempt of one group to snatch the resources of another group.

Randy: Competitive economics taken to its logical extreme.

hooks: Exactly.

Randy: I was taken to task by a feminist anarchist for taking the liberty of referring to you by your first name. The criticism was: had you been a male I wouldn't have been so quick to have done that.

hooks: I think this is the kind of trivial personal stuff people focus on that has very little meaning. I don't think it matters. To me, I think if someone read my work, they'd know I don't have issues around how I'm identified. Even when people capitalise my name, I don't freak out, even though that would not be my choice. I'm not attached to it, and in that sense I think we have to choose, what are the issues that really matter? We have to trust that. You have to trust that if you are calling my name in a way that is offensive to me, I'm going to share it with you. But you also have to know what your feelings are behind calling me 'bell'. I think we are obsessed in the U.S. with the personal, in ways that blind us to more important issues of life. I just think if we could take all the obsession with the personal, and personal judgment and have people be concerned about the environment, what a different world we would live in. Or race... ending racism. It's like, I was talking about Cornell West once, and somebody was saying to me, "Cornell is not a preacher; he's not ordained" – and another preacher friend of mine said, "I don't know about the importance of his being ordained. I saw him give a sermon. Lots of people joined the church and that would seem to be what being a preacher is all about". We have to look at the substance of something rather than the shadow. Is it more important that you, as a white male, read my work and learn from it, or what you call me? I think it's more important that you read my work, reflect on it, and allow it to transform your life and your thinking in some way. Now I do get a little pissed at people who write me and

want me to do things, and spell my name wrong.

Randy: I have read, from someone else, that your work is influenced by postmodernism. Is that true? Do you have an opinion about the end of history, in particular?

hooks: No. If anything I think postmodernism has the least impact on my work. My work is mostly influenced by the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. To the extent that we live in a postmodern world and it shapes the concrete circumstances of our daily lives, I would say postmodernism affects my work or influences my work. But in general, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about postmodernism.

Randy: The final question that I wrote down, I think we've already touched on to a certain degree. Some political groups say they are against classism, and that often sounds to me like they're saying they avoid prejudice on the basis of class, but don't oppose structural capitalism. I think you've already talked about the personal versus the systemic aspects of...

hooks: One of the things my work *Where We Stand: Class Matters* tried to do was say, 'We're a country that would rather talk about race than class'. I think what's so amazing about this historical moment is that it is bringing class to the fore and we have to think about the nature of work and hierarchy. When I think about the auto-industry and how it was one of the industries that brought all of these black men from the South to Michigan and other places to make more money than they could ever make in the cotton fields or the agricultural world of the South... what's happening now is all of that is closing down, and we know that it's going to reopen in Southern places, focusing on Mexican and other migrant workers to come and work cheaply and get none of the benefits. All of this stuff is amazing in terms of forcing people in this society to think more openly about class and about the intersectionalities.

The whole thing with Joe the Plumber – and then to find out that so much about Joe the Plumber was just fake – was the use of class (of white supremacy and class) to awaken old prejudices, to allow for a denial of the true impact of intersectionalities and

place. No wonder the wheel has to be invented again, and again, and again. We're being told by the publishing world that our major buying audience is a white audience. The presumption is of an unenlightened white audience, and when everything you write should be pitched to that audience, it becomes a really troubling question of what voice you use, and what space you can occupy. We're not just talking about the straight publishing world, we're talking about those vehicles in our culture that claim to represent some kind of alternative. That says that we have a lot of work to do to truly create a culture of resistance, that's not just occupied by people of colour individually knocking on the door for change, but that's really occupied by lots of people who see the necessity for having a more complex intellectual artistic life in this culture.

Chua: Debates around representation have focused almost exclusively on who is in the frame, as if it were separate from how the narrative unfolds. That's made it difficult for black writers whose work refuses that separation between truth and beauty to publish.

hooks: If your perspective isn't 'I'm negating blackness, in the interest of writing more experimentally, but, 'I'm affirming blackness and I still want to write experimentally', that's when you have trouble selling your product. The question I'm asked most often about my writing is: 'Who is the perceived audience?' There's this sense that if you really want to have that crossover audience, you've got to simplify, you've got to translate, you've got to make everything clear. But we know that there are a lot of interesting books by white writers that don't simplify, that don't make everything clear, and people presume that they will have an audience. There's a myth about artistic freedom, that it resides with the individual writer, and not that artistic freedom has to be mirrored in the publishing practices of a culture, or when you're talking about art, the practices of galleries and museums. It cannot be something that becomes a cultural norm simply by individual artists insisting that their work is an expression of artistic freedom.

Even though so many of us can name white supremacy, we go on to express shock and naive surprise that things are done the way they are or that our views aren't represented. To some extent, one's views do

differently. In my poetry writing, for example, I use a voice that tends to be much more abstract than the voice of my writing. A lot of people, when I first tried to get my poems published, said, 'There's nothing black about these poems'. Damn, how often do you have to prove that you're black? It's not enough that I'm a black woman writing these poems, but there has to be something in the language that tips off the reader, that you are reading something by a black woman writer. There's this constant struggle to actually have a lived practice that really mirrors this theoretical bullshit about hybridity and polyphonic voices.

I've always cursed like a sailor. I learned how to curse from my grandmother. I've always had a certain kind of street language that has been essential to how I've defined myself. But, it's a language that I keep under wraps. In certain settings, you can let that language out, but if you let it out in this other setting, you'll get checked immediately. I'm putting a lot of pressure on myself to 'come out of the closet' – that great metaphor for everything these days, in the sense of trying to speak certain languages in locations where I didn't speak them because I tried to conform to the dictates of those locations. What is border crossing, if in every setting, you simply scan the place and figure out the appropriate rules and abide by them? That ends up sounding much more like social fascism than any rigorous transgression.

Chua: In *Yearning*, that 'street language' is often set apart from your theorising by quotation marks, while in *Black Looks* and *Sisters of the Yam* it's a more organic component of the syntax. Have editors become more receptive to that linguistic transgression?

hooks: I went through this period where I would try to use more street language and it would all come back to me, completely edited back to standard English. These few months that I've been living in New York, I've really been overwhelmed by the degree to which there is no racial integration in publishing in our society.

I'm awed by the lack, not just of the concrete visible presence of people of colour, but also the failure to have progressive white people. We should be able to have spaces in this society where people of colour are not present, but where anti-racist perspectives will inform how things are organised and what takes

class. The white worker who has been displaced at General Motors has more in common with the displaced black worker than those larger white CEO's, and those Wall Street people who are determining their fate – whose thievery and greed is determining their fate.

It's interesting to look at all the aspects where everyday Americans, many of whom are not college educated, are thinking deeply now about our economic structure. See the way credit cards have exploited the working class and the working poor? I think it's going to be an interesting next ten years for the United States. For people like me, what is important and vital is to keep that education for critical consciousness around intersectionalities, so that people are able to not focus on one thing and blame one group, but be able to look holistically at the way intersectionality informs all of us: whiteness, gender, sexual preferences, etc. Only then can we have a realistic handle on the political and cultural world we live within.

Randy: That's all of my questions. Do you have anything to say to our audience, off the cuff?

hooks: Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchy is, dare to go against the grain of the conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope 🍌

A Sense of Recklessness

Interview by Lawrence Chua

From BOMB magazine 1994

Love takes us to places we might not ordinarily go. Ask anyone who's engaged the work of bell hooks. Her fearless inquiries and passionate provocations have left us questioning the once familiar terrain of cultural identity while simultaneously affirming the complexity of our own lived experiences. In her many books of critical writing, including Black Looks, Yearning, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life, (with Cornel West) and the forthcoming Outlaw Culture; her self-help book, Sisters of the Yam; her recent collection

of poetry, A Woman's Mourning Song, her artistic collaborations and her many public presentations, hooks has hit raw nerves, delving into the possibilities of culture as a place of resistance to white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. While most critical theorists speak about popular culture from the lofty perches of the academy, hooks has always insinuated herself in the fray.

Lawrence Chua: Recently, you were at a conference on black cinema where Stanley Crouch suggested that artists like Snoop Doggy Dog should be exterminated. How did you respond?

bell hooks: While it's crucial to critique the sexism and the misogyny of rappers like Snoop Doggy Dog, it is essential for everyone to remember that they are not only more complex than the way they represent themselves, they're more complex than the way white society represents them as well.

This notion, that Snoop Doggy Dog defines himself 'as he really is' is something I reject. He clearly defines himself with a persona that works in cultural production in this society. The most discouraging aspect of that conference for me was this insistence on liberal individualism, as though people's acts are disconnected from larger structures and larger forces of representation. Even Stanley Crouch wasn't responding to my points. He was actually playing to those larger, mainstream cultural forces that reward him for saying really negative things about rap. I don't believe it when people like Stanley Crouch say they are really concerned about misogyny. One can certainly read his essay on Toni Morrison and see incredible examples of virulent sexism and misogyny. I saw a continuum between the violence of a Snoop Doggy Dog and the violence of a Stanley Crouch, and I didn't really see them as being separate and distinct entities.

At the conference, I confessed that I have really violent impulses that sometimes listening to some panels I had wanted to come out and shoot people. The audience laughed, but I wasn't being funny, and I wasn't saying it to be cute or exhibitionist. I was acknowledging that the violent impulses don't just exist out there in black youth or in the underclass, but that they reside in people like myself as well – people who have our PhD's and our good jobs. But that doesn't mean that my life is not tormented by rageful or

hooks: Since we live in a cultural climate, especially in the academy where the realm of the personal is devalued, when you use that standpoint it may lead listeners to mishear. That voice may be very complex but people actually may not hear the complexity. I gave this talk framed around the idea of 'love takes me to places I would ordinarily not go'. I raised the whole question of love in a very psychoanalytical way, framing the discussion around notions of recognition and mirroring. I was really sad when so many people came up to me to say, "We love you," because they'd missed the point.

When you are a woman and you use a confessional narrative, people tend to think there is not some more complex structure of thinking or philosophy behind that narrative. I needed to bring some of that background thinking more to the fore, otherwise, it failed. But even if it failed to do as much as I wanted it to, it does not devalue the courage of trying to bring the voice of lived experience and confessional witnessing into our intellectual processing in a way that does not reduplicate that whole pattern of estrangement from self and ideas.

I am passionate about ideas. They're not just the stuff of spectatorship and entertainment to me. They're a life-blood, and that's what makes the intellectual process so radically different from the academic process. Part of the challenge for insurgent intellectuals, particularly those of us who are artists in this society, is to pull back from academe, actually, and academic settings, precisely to break this notion that has become so popular in the culture, that the two experiences are one.

Chua: I was curious how your own critical language is developing, with that strategy in mind.

hooks: I've been trying to use different languages for different settings, and it's hard. One of the things I'm trying to do is break with the traditional essay format, which has been an exhilarating and exciting format for me. But it also takes time. I'd like to do work that is more mixed media and pastiche. But when you want to make a shift, then you come up against an industry that doesn't want you to because they've already got a proven product. This has been very harmful to African American writers in general.

I am constantly working to shift my voice and to try to use it

intervening in the Hollywood apparatus in some ways by their very presence, by the racial images they create. Whereas, if we look at class, we don't see intervention in Hollywood. We actually see a reproduction of a certain relation to the working class and the poor. Hollywood has always had visions of the working class and the poor, cross-race, created by people who often are mired in contempt and fantasy, and/or voyeuristic fantasy about what those class realities are really like.

Chua: Your last book, *Sisters of the Yam*, speaks to and across many of those class borders. It was conceived of as a self-help book. How difficult was it to write a book that was not going to be sold as an academic text?

hooks: It was exciting for me to write *Sisters of the Yam* and try to find a more vernacular way to talk about certain things. It's also exciting to get a response from that. People would be shocked by the number of everyday people who take the time to write me a letter about a book. It wouldn't matter what kind of books I was writing, if I didn't get the feedback from communities of readers who let me know that the books are actually working. That fills me with a certain kind of joy.

To think of certain ways of writing as activism is crucial. What does it matter if we write eloquently about decolonisation if it's just white privileged kids reading our eloquent theory about it? Masses of black people suffer from internalised racism, our intellectual work will never impact on their lives if we do not move it out of the academy. That's why I think mass media is so important. Popular magazines and television have to be seen as central vehicles for the dissemination of intellectual thought. We are looking at a culture where millions of people don't read or write. If I want to get the message out there I have to use some other format. I do a lot more radio than I would like to do because it still has a place in the lives of many working-class people in our society. It amazes me.

Chua: There are some obvious limitations to personalising theoretical writing. How do you debate the theoretical element of a sentence that begins with 'As a 27-year-old Malaysian house queen...' without taking on the identity of the person who is saying it?

irrational, violent impulses. It does mean that instead of shooting people, I go home and write a critique. My irrational impulse to want to kill people who bore me or whose ideas are not very complex, clearly has to do with an exaggerated response to situations where I feel powerless. I think black people, across class, have many moments in our lives when we feel utterly powerless to change the direction of situations. And we don't deal with this collectively, because we're so in denial about it.

It is significant that the urge to exterminate was aroused by a moral standpoint wherein vulgarity must be dissed. This has a lot to do with censorship. I'm not talking about mainstream censorship. I'm talking about groups that claim to have progressive agendas, but also have practices of censorship, that involve their wanting to check people around crossing boundaries that 'don't make our movement look good'. There is a whole way of structuring conferences so that they end up being these celebratory events where a certain censorship takes place in the interest of maintaining unity. I see that as part of the colonising mentality that says, 'In case white people are looking, we need to present ourselves as this unified nation so we can't have these all-out dialectical exchanges where we show our differences'. We need multiple voices that mirror our multiple subjectivities. There's a cognitive dissonance between what is really being said by cultural critics – we're into border crossing, and cultural hybridity – and yet, when we come together, we still mirror the model of a unitary voice.

Chua: How is your own work challenging those boundaries? When we had lunch a few months ago, you were about to go on a T.V. talk show. You said you were doing this because you weren't reaching the audience you needed to start reaching.

hooks: I went on the Ricki Lake show and it was a disaster. But it was a great experience. There are academics who do work on popular culture, but who really just do a lot of theoretical talking about popular culture and don't actually enter those spaces that are much more full of contradictions, hostilities, and tensions. I heard those black folks in the audience at the Ricki Lake show saying, "We don't agree with Doctor hooks. We're not even going to call her Doctor. She doesn't even know what she's talking about." I felt seriously assaulted, but at

the same time, this was a different rage experience than sitting at home writing my cool article on the discourse of talk shows. To actually go there, and to participate, and see, and walk off the T.V. set because the politics of what was happening there were very disturbing to me... They had told us that there would be a 'special guest' but they hadn't said that it would be this Nazi woman.

But I wanted to go on that show because Ricki Lake has an incredible number of black viewers between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, and those are exactly the people who are not in women's studies classes, or in cool cultural studies classes where they're learning about a Cornel West or a bell hooks.

I used a quote by Snoop Doggy Dog at the NYU conference on black cinema, that really meant a lot to me. He said, "I don't rap. I just talk. I want to be able to relax and converse with my people." Are we, cultural workers situated in the academy, developing a jargon about cultural production that does not allow us to 'converse and cross' these very borders that we're talking about how cool it would be to cross? If we don't find a way to 'converse', all we're ever talking about is that those of us who have certain forms of class privilege can enter the low-down and dirty spaces and take what we want to get out of those spaces, and take our asses right back home. That is really crucial for the future of cultural criticism in the United States, for the future of magazines like BOMB, and the other kinds of magazines that many of us enjoy, Vibe, Details. How much are we conversating?

Chua: How does your own work accommodate that kind of conversating?

hooks: I am willing to debase myself in whichever way possible, and be treated like shit as I was on the Ricki Lake show. We can't minimise that because it's a very different experience from lecturing at places like Yale and Harvard where crowds of people are bowing down and saying, 'We're not worthy, we're not worthy', than to be among a whole crowd of young people waiting to get in to this show and talk, who couldn't give a fuck about bell hooks. Or to be in Flint, Michigan, talking to a hundred fifth-graders, who have no idea what I'm about, and to have to come up with a language that can cross those borders effectively. The point is not just to be some sort of

sterile role model who stands up and gives a canned talk.

One of the things that I've been critiqued a lot about is the level of confession in my work and my public 'performances'. If you read my early work, there's very little attention to the details of my life, very little personal stuff. One of the things that I found, as I tried to cross boundaries, was that I had to give people something that allowed them to identify with what I was saying, and not just offer some abstract idea that might not have any relevance to their lives. That is all about the function of story. When those little fifth-graders had question-and-answer, the first thing they wanted to know was, 'How much money do you make?' Now, these fifth-graders are coming out of one of the most economically depressed states in this country. Most of their parents work in the auto industry. How much money you make is more crucial to them than the relationship between feminism and Marxism. But to answer that question honestly and openly can be a way to then talk about feminism and the structure of capitalism. In fact, we went from how much money I made to, "Did you guys know how much on the average women make?" People were really shocked, because they so believe in the myth of democracy, they all thought women receive equal pay for equal work.

Crossing borders means that at times I share things that I don't want to share. But if you really see yourself as a worker for freedom, then the challenge is also on you to sacrifice whatever notions of privacy that many of us would want to hold onto, especially if we are clinging to bourgeois models of self and identity. These fifth-graders wanted to understand book production, because I know that they have parents who are saying, 'You don't want to be a writer, writers don't make anything. If you work in the plant this is what is available to you'.

Class is the most un-cool topic in cultural studies in the United States. It's easier to look at the black identity of the Hughes Brothers who made *Menace II Society* than to acknowledge the class positionality of these young men and to talk about how it may have shaped their opinion. Maybe they find a gangsta in the 'hood really glamorous because it's not the world that they emerged from. That's a class critique that gets submerged under an evocation of racial solidarity, or racial intervention. These young black men are