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30 September 2016

discussing the black female and modern day feminism with bell hooks

With recent regressions in race relations in the USA and beyond fraying the thread that binds communities, bell hooks sits down for a rare conversation with i-D, to discuss her thoughts on internet feminism and the position of the black female image...



Revolution begins in the self and
with the self." BELL HOOKS

In these fraught times, the discourse surrounding the intersectionality of race, feminism, and politics has found a prominent place in contemporary cultural consciousness. These themes have underpinned feminist theorist and acclaimed writer bell hooks' work since she published her opus, *Ain't I a Woman?*, in 1981.

bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins during the height of racial segregation to a working class family in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Her mother, Rosa, was a homemaker and her father, Veodis, a janitor. As a child, bell was already reciting the works of prominent black poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes. Excelling at her studies, she went on to achieve her B.A. in English from Stanford, her PhD in literature from the University of California, and began writing under the name bell hooks (written

in lower case to focus the attention on her message rather than herself), adopted from her maternal great-grandmother.

Throughout her prolific career, she has written over 30 books discussing how race and gender link to exploitation and the oppression of the black community, and in doing so, she has become one of the world's most foremost female academics on race and gender. More recently, her essay *Moving Beyond Pain* — which bell penned in response to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* — carefully critiqued the album and its visuals in relation to the commodification of the black female body.

What is the role of the black female in modern day feminism? What, if anything, do you think needs to change?

The major intervention black women, and women of color, have made to contemporary feminism has been the focus on what we now call intersectionality, what I would, back in the day, talk about as an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. But it was about the refusal to accept the notion that gender defines everything about who a female person is, and that we have to consider other things, like class and race. People use the term 'intersectionality' but it hasn't really had the transformative impact either on feminist thinking and theory and action that we wanted it to have. Feminism is endangered in the United States, there is a tremendous hatred people in the States are showing to women in power, especially to Hillary Clinton. It feels like we're in a mighty anti-feminist backlash.

It's interesting that you brought Hillary up. She has largely got the support of the older black female community, but the younger generation of black American women say they don't feel represented by her.

I don't think that we've ever had a president that has showed any kind of significant concern with black people or the politics of race, so I don't think that we can expect any significant positive change from either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

What part does black feminism play within the Black Lives Matter movement?

Everyone is aware that Black Lives Matter began with black females, many of whom are lesbians and many of whom are committed feminists, but I don't actually see an anti-patriarchal perspective within the framework of the movement. It seems that radical women take part, and yet, in order to have that space and power they have to relinquish the discourse of feminism.

So much of what you are saying is built upon a sense of community. How do you think class has infiltrated the movement?

So much of the cultural discourse centers around an obsession with wealth and upward mobility; it's actually made it harder for people to radicalize in communities because there is such a refusal on the part of many people of color and black people to really have a critique of capitalism.

Do you think there is a big difference between your experience as a black American female and mine as a black British female?

Absolutely. Here in the U.S. there has been an inordinate focus on black masculinity and the assumption that the way to liberate black men is through patriarchy. I don't see that running through British culture in the same way, that constant focus on black masculinity tends to obfuscate and take away meaningful attention from black females. The narrative of liberation in the U.S almost always ends up in terms of black people valorizing patriarchy.

Can you speak about what you do with your organization, the bell hooks institute?

The primary focus of the bell hooks institute is really twofold. One is to protect my legacy and my work for the future, so included in the institute is my own collection of African American art, artifacts, and archive. Then the second purpose is to be a liaison between academic theory and everyday life. I'm really interested in the role of conversation as a teaching tool. At the institute we don't court an academic audience so much as a critically thinking audience.

Why do you think conversation is such an important tool for education?

If you talk to someone and they tell you 'oh, this is a really good book to read' you remember that book, but if you just read a review somewhere, you might not be as engaged. Now that social media is so strong and powerful, people talking to each other is actually a crucial intervention on the estrangement and isolation that can happen when people are too engaged with social media. Interacting with people face-to-face is critical — disembodied connections will never have the same value as embodied connections.

What does the word 'justice' mean to you?

What we see in many cases is a white supremacy and what defines that as a political systems is grave injustice. So justice has a value worth working for, worth sacrificing for. Dr Martin Luther King did talk a lot about justice, but I also think of a modern day activist like Bryan Stevenson, who is committed to trying to create justice for black children and black people who are unjustly imprisoned; he's just amazing. Conversation is very connected to this, one of the books that we are looking at, at the institute, is called *The Soul Making Room* by Dee Dee Risher, who used to write for a Christian magazine called *The Other Side*. Her whole thesis is around the degree to which hospitality and willingness to engage the stranger aids us in efforts to end domination. I can't think of a more appropriate moment to discuss this, as we going through such a rise in xenophobia and white supremacy at the moment. We need to talk about what it means to embrace people who are not like ourselves.

How do you convince the average black American to have these conversations with someone who may be overtly against what they represent?

Well... that is a challenge, and we can't say it's easy. I was actually just talking with a

woman this morning about a white male that is very supportive of Trump, very conservative. I was saying how I've tried to be an open comrade with him and to explain to him that Trump threatens our lives as people of color, he just didn't get it and I found that very discouraging. Part of me just wanted to say 'oh I give up on this person.' I think the challenge of not giving up on people is very central to the struggle for justice. You have to have hope in everyone's capacity to transform. That is really the bottom line in terms of any kind of struggle to end domination; that we don't demonize groups and that we stay with the values that are motivating and pushing our concerns.

What advice would you give young people about social activism and how they can make tangible changes within the community to inform and educate other young people?

Revolution begins in the self and with the self. I see among my students an eagerness to be engaged in social activism, but without the maturity of emotional awareness and stability that allows us to really look at a situation and say, 'What's my purpose here? What's the intent here?' On that level it's really important for people, those who are young especially, to engage in education for critical consciousness and to not think that just because they think sexism is wrong to get up and be part of some protest. Young people need to remember that it's important to really study and reflect on what our aims are, and what we can actually do. To ask questions like, 'what does this particular protest do?' Like with Black Lives Matter, find out what the acts of social change are that came out of that movement? Of course, it's a statement to just bring awareness, but what do we do after bringing awareness? It's not just Black Lives Matter or Occupy Wall Street, it's about how we take the emotional energy of social activism into an arena that creates concrete change in our everyday lives and in the lives of people around us. I am really big on working for change in the actual communities we live in, because so often when we engage a larger critique, and a larger protest, it doesn't have an impact on where we live.

Engaging in huge movements is incredible, but you also need to take care of house and home, and try and effect change in the communities you live in, and amongst the people that surround you.

Yes, a lot of my young students have been amazing in educating their parents for critical consciousness. That's a meaningful sign of resistance because it really helps people to see the family as a place where it's important to have an absence of domination. The home is where many of us first learned first hand about domination and abuse.

What power do you think social media has in affecting change?

I think one of the clear misuses of social media is that people are frequently very hostile in their responses to different opinions. The response to my critical essay on *Lemonade*, is an example. So many people were so shallow in their responses, like 'bell doesn't like Beyoncé' and I kept saying to people 'I don't know Beyoncé! This is not about Beyoncé as a person, this is about ideas.' I think that somehow social media allows people to both personalize things in ways that are not healthy, but also to have a level of mean

spiritedness in how they respond, because people often respond in a personal way like 'bell hooks is willing to like Emma Watson, but she doesn't like Beyoncé.' To try to shift people away from the cult of personality and celebrity is difficult, and I'm not so sure that social media has helped in that realm because it's an easy way for people to claim 'celebrity or space' through personal beef towards other people.

So you've seen feminism almost become a vehicle of critique and slander rather than a vehicle to unify? There is a whole wave of internet feminism that would say it's done more for the movement, but you're saying not necessarily...

Well, I wouldn't say that it hasn't, I shy away from anything as reductive as either/or. Whether it's good or it's bad, I think that what we see in some cases is a very powerful agent for galvanizing people towards working for change, and in other cases it indulges some of the worst aspects of social organizing. I'm not a person that uses social media in the way that other people do, I have a helper who does email for me! I don't do a lot on the internet and I don't read a lot on the internet. I'm a primitive who reads books everyday. I think because of my commitment to a spiritual practice, I need to not overload my mind and imagination. But the internet is great when you want information you don't have, I love how easy it is to access it.

It's been 35 years since *Ain't I a Woman?* was first published. How do you see it fitting into a contemporary cultural landscape?

One of the things I often find enormously discouraging is that so many of the ideas that came out in my early books discussed the devaluation of black women and what's really clear is that not a lot has changed. So many things have changed in terms of greater representation and greater presence, yet so frequently this presence has led to the unveiling of inordinate hostility. So in the States we have more hatred, even though we have more awareness at the same time.

You also have the fetishization of the black image.

And that fetishization is an expression of dehumanization and the colonizing gaze. I think people forget that when there is a lack of representation, and then suddenly there you are, it's hard to maintain that critical vigilance that allows you to unpack what a particular image may *actually* be conveying.