

Speaking the Unspeakable. bell hooks' Living Political Discourse

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Abstract

Focusing on a historical and critical reading of bell hook's work, the essay analyzes the feminist problem of the interconnection of sex, race and class in contemporary neoliberal society. hooks' understanding of the ideological function of mass media highlights the link between representation and social reproduction, which is in turn critical for grasping the tension between the politicization and commodification of identities. On this analytical basis, the "margin" emerges as an epistemic and political stance, which allows us to both understand the polemical function of history and memory and to regard feminism as a politics of articulation.

Keywords: bell hooks; ideology; feminism; identity; history.

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1 Treacherous Celebrations

After her death, the mainstream media she stubbornly criticized throughout her career celebrated bell hooks for her contribution to feminist political theory. These celebrations are justified by her lifelong intellectual and political commitment to social movements for liberation, but also contain some betrayals, more or less unintended. All obituaries explain that Gloria Jean Watkins had chosen her *nom de plume*, spelled in lowercase, to highlight ideas and their collective production rather than the person of the author. However, she is defined and represented as “an icon,” even listed among the most influential women of the Twentieth century and gifted with an art cover by *Time*.¹ Perhaps faced with such a celebration she would have been critical, as she was when commenting Angela Davis’s militancy. Hers was a rare case of female leadership in the Black power movement, but when Davis was raised to iconic status by the media her experience became “exceptional,” thus discouraging young Black girls from taking it as exemplary. And yet, bell hooks was also convinced that biographies of Black women activists and radical thinkers are to be known for letting young girls learn that becoming a “radical subject” is hard and contradictory, but always possible.² This explains why she merged feminist theory, history and biography, emphasizing the politics which lives in personal experience, while bridging personal experience and history. The extremely dense phrase “white imperialist capitalist patriarchy,” which in later writings became “transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” was meant to describe the historical process and the “global context” in which different experiences of oppression and exploitation are interconnected, and complex relations of domination and power are deployed.³

Few obituaries use that formula;⁴ one of them observes that today it appears “curiously baroque,”⁵ others speak of “economic inequalities” and insist on hook’s capacity to make feminism more “inclusive,” listing “class” and “capitalism” with race and racism, gender and sexism as if all of these were descriptive rather than polemical and political categories.⁶ However, as she explained in 1996 during an “uncut” conversation with Stuart Hall, the phrase points to the necessity of sustaining “a critique of capitalism,”⁷ which is what obituaries keep in silence, what remains unspeakable by the mainstream. The celebration of bell hooks’ intellectual and political activism by the media risks segregating her voice to the past, making of her “an item on the trophy shelves of corporate multiculturalism.”⁸ Thus, while recognizing that hooks’ feminism spread from a specific historical conjuncture, we should also ask ourselves what makes her critique of society a living political discourse which still questions our present, allowing us to “speak the unspeakable.”⁹

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1. *Time*, December 15, 2021: <https://time.com/6129096/bell-hooks-obituary-dream-hampton/>
 2. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* [1992] (New York: Routledge, 2015), 55–56.
 3. bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism* (London and Winchester: Pluto Press, 1982), 27 and *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 6. hooks speaks of this “global context” in an interview released to *New York Times* on December 10, 2015: <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-Blackness/>
 4. See the articles published on December 15, 2021 in *Washington Post*, *El Diario*, and *Rolling Stone*. See also *Il Foglio*, December 16, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2021/12/15/bell-hooks-dead/>; https://www.eldiario.es/cultura/fallece-bell-hooks-autora-clave-feminismo-antirracista_1_8583043.html; <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/bell-hooks-obit-dead-1272204/>; <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2021/12/16/news/bell-hooks-la-scrittrice-che-ha-reso-popolare-il-femminismo-radicale-e-intersezionale-3475351/>
 5. *Welt*, December 16, 2021: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article235690764/Zum-Tod-von-bell-hooks-Die-Aktivistin.html>
 6. *New York Times*; *Zeit Online*, December 15, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/books/bell-hooks-dead.html>; <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2021-12/bell-hooks-gestorben-us-feministin-autorin>
 7. bell hooks, Stuart Hall, *Uncut Funk. A Contemplative Dialogue* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 117.
 8. These words are borrowed from Paul Gilroy’s foreword to *Uncut Funk*, where he observes how globalization valorized Afro-American culture outside the conditions of its production (Paul Gilroy, foreword to hooks, Hall, *Uncut Funk*, ix–xiii, xi).
 9. hooks, *Uncut Funk*, 88; Gilroy, foreword, ix.

2 Where We Stand

Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It's the subject that makes us all tense, nervous and uncertain about where we stand.¹⁰

Two processes are highlighted by these lines, written by bell hooks at the beginning of the new millennium as an introduction to *Where We Stand. Class Matters*. First, there is an integration of antagonistic cultures such as feminism and Black resistance within contemporary capitalist society and political institutions. Commodification has turned them into fashionable items, consumable “lifestyles.” Their oppositional capacity has been neutralized by the very system they are supposed to contest. This process has caused trouble in “the neat binary categories of white and Black, male and female.” Class relationships split each of them in two: “the changing face of global labor” and transnational migrations do not allow us to easily “identify the enemy, [...] who to fear or who to challenge,” while making it more difficult to organize, to find a common language fit for confronting an “ongoing and sustained class warfare.”¹¹ To be clear, this trouble is not new at all. Since her first seminal work, *Ain't I a Woman?*, by writing a Black feminist history of North America bell hooks actively contributed to showing how the concept of woman is doubly polemical: while it is politicized by women in movement against the patriarchal conditions of their social and political subordination, it is also crisscrossed by power relations and conflicts fought along color and class lines.¹² This is what makes the historical depth of her inquiry so important: not only was she among the first to systematically unveil the patriarchal and racist roots of the capitalist society born out of slavery, but her work is itself produced within changing historical conditions, that is during the emergence of the neoliberal program which shaped our global present.

The Sixties are a turning point in hooks' history of the present, a period overlapping the end of segregation in 1964 and the beginning of the thirty-year-long dismantlement of the welfare state, inaugurated in the name of Johnson's War on Poverty under the auspices of Daniel P. Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family*. According to hooks, at this turning point “class-based racial integration” disrupted cross-class racial solidarity, which was stronger when the color line was carved into the law. This integration prevented “a radical talented tenth [...] lead the Black masses to revolt and cultural revolution.” The public blame neoconservative social scientists put on Black women dependent on welfare enforced the idea, already rooted in the slave society, that “the acquisition of patriarchal power and privilege” was a paradigm for racial uplift.¹³ The white middle class family was made the standard of integration for Black people by pitying “women who received assistance from the State [...] because they did not have men to provide for them.” At the same time, in the early Seventies mass media spread the image of the poor “as parasites and predators,” as if the massive unemployment and underemployment of Black men were an individual guilt rather than a structural condition of the existing economic system that prevented those wearing Black skin to dress as white breadwinners.¹⁴

These changes were accompanied by “a shift in global politics”: under the pressure of anticolonial movements, it became clear that “white people would have to do business with people of color globally to maintain US imperialist economic domination,” and that “the old colonialism could not form the basis of contemporary exchanges globally.” In this post-colonial context, when migrant labor became increasingly central in production and services, women's class mobility activated by the feminist movement intertwined with cross-border mobility: “when privileged women left the home

10. hooks, *Where We Stand*, vii.

11. Ibid, 6.

12. Cf. Paola Rudan, *Donna. Storia e critica di un concetto polemico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), ch. 3.

13. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 91–92 and *Killing Rage. Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 82–85. On Moynihan's report, see Bottomfish Blues, *Amazon Nation or Aryan Nation. White Women and the Coming of Black Genocide [1989–1990]* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2014); Barbara Omolade, *The Rising Song of African American Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

14. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 20, 124 and *Killing Rage*, 66.

to work, someone had to stay in the home and do the dirty work” for little pay. The sexual division of labor was not challenged, but rather reorganized across a transnational, post-colonial color line.¹⁵

hooks analyzes these changes in the organization of production and social reproduction by emphasizing the ideological shift which justified the neoliberal shift in public policies fostered in the United States by neoconservatives:¹⁶ while the Sixties and Seventies were marked by “a sense of bounty that could be shared,” in the Eighties and Nineties “widespread communal concern for justice and social welfare was swiftly replaced by conservative notions of individual accountability and self-centered materialism.” The blaming of Black women and the poor which accompanied the dismantlement of the welfare state was paralleled by a devaluation of the “traditional religious belief” that, particularly within the formerly segregated Black communities, had supported solidarity and a notion of “communalism.” Having experienced this Black Christian solidarity when she was young, bell hooks considers the idea that poor people “chose” their fate, and mundane success is a sign of divine blessing, more as an effect of “the new-age thought” rather than of the old protestant ethic. What is important for her, however, is how “opportunities of class mobility created by radical political movements for social justice, civil rights and women’s liberation” unintentionally supported “the popular truism that ‘anyone can make it big in America.’”¹⁷ The myth of a “classless society,” and the rise of a “Black bourgeoisie,” socially integrated via patriarchal family values, had the ideological effect of hiding class conflict, making of the middle-class a “fetish,” the quintessential representation of a progressive process of universal integration into the existing society and political order.¹⁸

This ideological effect further intensified in the Eighties, when the idea of a classless society was supplanted by “the notion that everyone can be wealthy.” The road to widespread hedonism and consumerism was paved by *money talk*: money became “the measure of value, where it is believed that everything and everybody can be bought.”¹⁹ This fundamental assumption of classical political economy acquired a new meaning during and after the Cold War. Before 1989, “we knew the word *communism* because keeping the world safe for democracy was discussed. And communism was the identified threat.” After 1989, the global failure of socialism helped to affirm the refusal of any “vision of communalism” based on the re-distribution of wealth. When debt became “the American way of life,” talking of money instead of class established a continuity between the “century of ideologies” and the “end of ideologies” by erasing all alternatives from the horizon of political expectations.²⁰ Money talk enacts the ideological effect of making social differences indifferent: first by promising universal accessibility to the American dream, then by ensuring that everyone can enjoy wealth, even if some will fall in the attempt. Instead, talking of class means politically valorize social differences as lines of conflict against the ideological effect of money.²¹

15. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 92, 107, 6. This process was studied by Barbara Ehrenreich, to whom hooks refers for her early seminal works on the “feminization of poverty,” though complaining that she failed to offer a radical critique of capitalist patriarchy. Cf. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South end Press, 1984), 98 ff; Barbara Ehrenreich - Arlie R. Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).

16. On North American neoconservatism, see *Scienza & Politica*, 61 (2019), special issue edited by Raffaella Baritono.

17. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 64–65, 44. On the contradictory movement which led from the “long Sixty-eight” to neoliberalism, cf. Sandro Mezzadra - Maurizio Ricciardi, “Nel segno del Sessantotto,” *Scienza & Politica*, 59 (2018), 5–16.

18. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 85 and *Where We Stand*, 91. Cf. Matteo Battistini, *Middle Class: An Intellectual History through Social Sciences. An American Fetish from its Origins to Globalization* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022).

19. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 80, 47. I use *money talk* working on hooks’ comments on Toni Morrison’s conception of “race talk,” where talk is conceived of as a popularized discourse which materially affects social relations (hooks, *Killing Rage*, 3).

20. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 22, 40–41, 55; *Killing Rage*, 176. On ideology cf. Maurizio Ricciardi, “L’eterna attualità dell’ideologia tra individuo, storia e società,” in *Storia d’Europa e del Mediterraneo, XIV: Culture, ideologie, religioni* (Rome: Salerno Editore, 2017), 717–747; Carlo Galli, *Ideologia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022).

21. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 47, 157.

3 Representation and Social Reproduction

The centrality bell hooks recognizes to class domination and conflict does not lead her to focus on a critique of the relationships of production, but rather on the ideological conditions of their social reproduction.²² The turning point of the Sixties is globally relevant for understanding her analysis, since at that time racist domination changed: once Black people were no longer subjugated through slavery or segregation, the minds of both whites and Blacks became the space to be colonized in order to ensure the coexistence of racial integration and a “neo-colonial white supremacy.” Television played a crucial role in neutralizing the Blacks’ “spirit of resistance” by breaking the barrier between whites and Blacks, between the values of the dominant and the dominated. For bell hooks, therefore, a cultural critique of mass media is necessary for reactivating social antagonisms through the formation of an “oppositional world-view.”²³

hooks rarely speaks of “social reproduction,” and rarely conceptualizes the key-words of her cultural critique of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, such as ideology and representation. This does not mean that her critique lacks a theory, but rather depends on her problematic choice to write theory through a non-academic language, in order to speak directly to oppressed and exploited people who yearn for social justice.²⁴ Among her sources, Stuart Hall’s work provided crucial theoretical materials for hooks’ practice of cultural studies as a critique of society and is illuminating for understanding that practice. Particularly, three elements of Hall’s discourse operate within hooks’. Firstly, a non-deterministic conception of ideology: the correspondence between the position which a class holds in economic relations and its ideology is not necessary, but “the effect” of an ideological practice is. Thus, in the singular, ideology defines the articulation of a socially situated subject— whether “class or other social forces”—and ideas. Its function is to reproduce - not only biologically or technically, “but socially and culturally as well”—the social relations of production. The second element concerns the role played by the media. In the plural, ideologies are “systems of representation [...] in which men and women [...] live their imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence.” Representation is productive of meanings, i.e. “codes of intelligibility” that allow our experience of the world and spread from social practices of signification. Among these practices, the media are “the modality of functioning [of ideology].” Lastly, systems of representation are historical: the individual enunciates him- or herself “in relation to different range of social sites,” and through “a variety of representational systems” which includes sex and race.²⁵ In short, the critique of representation is crucial for understanding “where we stand.”

These presuppositions help to understand hooks’ explanation of the non-existence of “a strong organized politicized working class” in the US where, through the socialization of mass media, most working people “learn to think ideologically like the rich” whatever “their economic circumstances.” The non-necessary correspondence between the subject’s social position and his or her ideology makes room for the “pedagogical role” of the mass media. The system of representation which on the television screen shows the poor as undeserving and the rich as vulnerable (*The rich also cry* is the title of a renowned soap opera from the Eighties) hides the fact that the wealth of the latter is based on the exploitation of the former.²⁶ Similarly, the systematic “devaluation of Black womanhood” enacted by the media through the reactivation of sexist and racist representations rooted in the age of slavery, like the savage “Sapphire” and the servile “mammy,” justifies both their sexual violation and exploitation by the white man and pushes Black women to identify with patriarchal family values and white middle class social standard of femininity as ways to escape racist and sexist oppression. As for Black men, their representation as undeserving, emasculated, and idle—which was necessary first

22. For an overview on the feminist conceptualization of social reproduction, cf. Cinzia Arruzza, “Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and its Critics,” *Science & Society*, 1 (2016), 9–30.

23. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 109–110; bell hooks, preface to *Feminist Theory*.

24. hooks’ *Feminism is for Everybody. Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South end Press, 2000) is exemplary of this attitude, which is also discussed in *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

25. Stuart Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debate,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985), 91–114.

26. hooks, *Class Matters*, 69–77.

to expel from the “public conscience” their hard labor as slaves, then to justify the dismantlement of welfare—triggered their identification with the phallogentric ideal of masculinity proposed by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy: Black men “have been shaped by these representations” and actively reproduced them.²⁷ This productive function of representation explains bell hooks’ ruthless criticism of the societal role of mass media. Representation produces identification where identity is lacking:

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. [...] They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance.²⁸

hooks’ reactivation of the etymological, theatrical meaning of representation as something which ‘stands for,’ a *proxy* that fictionally occupies the place of reality and fills a gap of knowledge, makes representation a way of appropriating and producing reality through the construction of images. These images emerge from within and in turn legitimize existing social relations of domination by shaping their subjects.²⁹ In this sense, cultural criticism is a critique of the modes of social reproduction.

These modes are themselves historical. hooks highlights a shift from a system of representation based on the assimilation of difference to one operating through the commodification of differences which neutralizes their antagonist capacity and makes their representation a means of social reproduction. The case of “Black beauty” is exemplary: after de-segregation, the aesthetic pride of Black people was a polemical stance against assimilation. This radicalization of the Black liberation movement was subjugated by white supremacy in two ways: one, in the Seventies, was economic and spread from the fear of falling into poverty—i.e., of not finding a job—by appearing as non-assimilated. The other, at the end of the Eighties, was cultural. The presence of “Black beauty” in the morning television programs suggested that aesthetics was a question of “personal preferences,” unrelated with racism. The commodification of difference “promotes paradigms of consumption,” and produces “the Other” through representation, by denying “the significance of that Other’s history through a process of de-contextualization.” The commodified difference incorporates the socially produced dominant values, which in turn confirm white supremacy as “an epistemological standpoint” that continues to make Blackness “an ontological symbol” of oppression,³⁰ while turning it into an object of individual consumption devoid of any oppositional capacity and collective meaning. Depoliticization does not only occur through the erasure of class as a political signifier of a difference which highlights social antagonism, but also through the capitalist valorization of differences via representation. Therefore, an effective cultural criticism must question both the social production of identities through representation and the capacity of their politicization to interrupt the social reproduction of transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

4 Identity Troubles

In 1992, in the introduction of *Black Looks. Race and Representation*, hooks announced:

These essays are about identity. Since decolonization as a political process is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past, even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future.³¹

27. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 70–78; *Black Looks*, 88–90.

28. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 38.

29. hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.

30. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 188–191 and *Black Looks*, 30, 10.

31. hooks, *Black Looks*, 4.

Identity is neither what defines one's being, nor the presupposition of struggle, but rather what results from a process of self-definition against domination. This process is conceived of as "decolonization": if "colonization" is the name of a domination which changes historically—as it moved from a system of conquest and ownership to a societal process which affects the mind—, and if it operates through the imposition of an "epistemological standpoint" which provides schemes for interpreting reality, then in order to resist domination we must question our standpoint and the images—representations—with which we identify.³² History is part of this process: the act of "remembering the past" can bridge the gap between reality and representation, thus becoming a critical tool which makes room for change. What counts for bell hooks is not the past as an archeological object, but rather as the object of an act of remembering.³³ This act can be healing, thus interrupting the reproduction of a historical wound that has the power to subjugate. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is clear on this point, as the writer invokes the necessity of "remembering": Sethe's killing violence was a "fleeing from a history that is a burden too great to bear. It is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery." History, therefore, is the practice of recognizing the present as a result of past domination in order to get rid of the presence of the past.³⁴ All this means, however, that the past is itself made by the act of remembering, a representation of reality which produces identity within changing historical coordinates. In a context in which differences are commodified, the politicization of identities may challenge the existing relations of domination, while always running the risk of being "eaten, consumed and forgotten."³⁵

According to bell hooks, Black nationalism couldn't escape this trap. Black nationalism is a consolidated object of her criticism, which begun with *Ain't I a Woman?* and culminated with the ruthless attack against Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March on Washington in 1995.³⁶ What is worth noticing here is how in this case, for hooks, history was mobilized to produce an "essentialist-based" identity. In Black nationalism, history does not serve to answer the urgent cry for the struggle for Black liberation that is also able to challenge capitalist exploitation and sexism, but as a representation of the "primitive," an "atavistic narrative, a fantasy of otherness."³⁷ This fantasy enables criticism of "Eurocentrism" because of its unitary representation, i.e. universalization, of white experience which erases the "African ways of knowing," but is based on an equally unitary representation of Africa as a paradise lost, where all was perfect before imperialism. Thus, while this representation of Black "authenticity" legitimizes the claim for control over Black women's bodies to assure that the Black nation is pure, and silences them as 'traitors' when they refuse to be controlled, it also replicates the white supremacist overvaluation of whiteness, "by seeing Blackness solely as a marker of powerlessness and victimization."³⁸ This victimization, in turn, has a dual function: on one hand, it grants a "moral authority" over the whites to self-victimizing Blacks, which is needed to build platforms for redress without changing the existing structures; on the other hand, it comforts the whites by denying Blacks' activism and self-determination. Also rising from the need to resist cultural appropriation, this fantasy is used by the contemporary commodification of Blackness, that is, from the white supremacist epistemic standpoint: for being acknowledged as different within the "American Dream," the Other "must assume recognizable forms." The cultural narrative of the "primitive" mirrors the "white western conception of the dark Other," rather than questioning this representation by highlighting its role in the reproduction of racial and sexed hierarchies. The mainstream white culture "offers the mantle of victimization

32. Ibid. 5. This recalls Spivak's conception of "epistemic violence" as explained in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*, eds. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 66–111: 76.

33. hooks draws from Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.

34. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 46–47 and *Uncut Funk*, 88. On "remembering," cf. Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 283 ff.

35. hooks, *Black Looks*, 40.

36. Cf. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 108 ff, and *Uncut Funk*, 24, 29, where Malcom X' patriarchalism is at least partially reconsidered.

37. hooks, *Black Looks*, 32–36.

38. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 243–244.

as a substitute for transformation of society.”³⁹ Difference can be eaten, consumed as an exotic spice on the mainstream table, and then forgotten.

hooks’ criticism of essentialized identities also extends to feminism, not only white but also Black. While sharing Audre Lorde’s attempt to produce a feminist politicization starting from the convergence of race, sex and class, she also observes that Lorde evoked a “negative experience of Black womanhood as ‘commonly’ shared,” suggesting that it “represents ‘authentic’ Black female reality.”⁴⁰ In this way, an experience which is socially produced runs the risk of being turned into an essence. The authenticity of the Black woman’s experience—which is made a true and proper “brand” by academic feminists—coincides with victimization and establishes a Black female identity that confirms “white males as all-powerful victimizers,” while suppressing Black’s women experiences of resistance and struggle. The moral authority of the victim becomes normative and “punitive” against the critical voices of these women, making of them “outsiders,” since victimhood must be aggressively defended to obtain redresses for discrimination within the existing social structure, as middle-class white women did.⁴¹ In this way, hooks places the ‘old’ critique of “sisterhood” into the new historical context of the Nineties, in which “cultural difference *sells*” and corporate institutional multiculturalism operates by fueling nationalism, fundamentalism, identity politics and separatism.⁴² She then urges us to understand how the oppositional capacity of the politicization of identities is taken on board by a system of representation in which differences are made commodities that incorporate the values socially produced by the dominant epistemology. It is equally important to understand how to prevent political identities from being absorbed into the market of multicultural exchange, in which all differences can be included through the institutional recognition and redress of victimhood, without questioning the structural conditions that produce subordination and exploitation.

5 A Living Discourse

According to bell hooks, a collective movement does not spring from a shared experience. This is “a sphere of political inarticulateness” that reproduces fragmentation, as if only women should fight for women’s rights, gays for gays’ and Blacks for Blacks.⁴³ When she states that “feminism is for everybody” and that patriarchy also affects men’s experience, however, hooks is neither calling for a paradoxically universal identity based on shared victimhood, where the distinction between who dominates and who is dominated is erased by the assumption of an impersonal oppressive regime. Domination is an asymmetric relationship which is both embodied and institutionalized,⁴⁴ so much so that what she defines a “privilege”—whether granted by sex, race or class, or by their simultaneous operations—is neither a status nor an ontological datum, which prevents the privileged subject from rejecting domination and becoming part of relations of solidarity, but an active practice of profiting from an advantage granted by the existing social relations.⁴⁵ As Paul Gilroy observes in his 2018 foreword to the conversation between hooks and Hall, “there are no casual invocations here of either privilege or victimage,” but only “a vital dynamic *method*” aiming to understand how “different

39. Ibid. 17–18, 60 and hooks, *Black Looks*, 32–36, 26. A similar critique of the moralism of identity politics emerges in Wendy Brown, *States of Injury. Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

40. hooks, *Uncut Funk*, 35 and *Black Looks*, 43, where she critically reads Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches* [1984] (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007). For a discussion of Lorde’s and hooks’ “notion of difference,” cf. Joan M. Martin, “The Notion of Difference for Emerging Womanist Ethics: The Writings of Audre Lorde and bell hooks,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (1993), 39–51.

41. BL 43–45; KR 54–56.

42. hooks, *Black Looks*, 16–17, 43–45 and *Killing Rage*, 54–56, 201–203. About the commodification of difference, hooks refers to Jonathan Rutherford, “A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference,” in *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*, 9–27.

43. hooks, *Uncut Funk*, 76–77.

44. Cf. hooks, *Black Looks*, 93–94, and *Killing Rage*, 195.

45. hooks, *Black Looks*, 13, 152.

contradictions and conflicts become articulated together in specific, historical and economic circumstances.”⁴⁶

This is precisely the aim of hooks’ historical work: history can be reactivated polemically against the ideological effects of money talk and of representations which hide the opposition between those who dominate and those who are dominated, starting from the assumption that the opposing parts are no longer homogeneous, if ever they were. Thus, while recognizing the need to tell the hidden history of the present from the point of view of the oppressed, she explicitly refuses the representation of their past as uncontaminated by domination. Moreover, she is critical about the idea that the polemical activation of history should rely on sources produced only by the oppressed. As her critique of representation shows, subjects are shaped within social relations of domination, which means that antagonistic subjectivity cannot emerge from a presumed ‘outside.’ Only starting from this assumption, the act of remembering can be an antagonistic practice which helps to understand and even transform the present by placing it in a new relation with the past.⁴⁷

This brings hooks to align herself with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak when she calls for a “shift of location,” and highlights “the radical possibility that surfaces when positionality is problematized.”⁴⁸ This not only means to know where we stand, and to inquire into the historical processes which produced our identities, but also to take a stand on the side of the oppressed. These two practices cannot be separated, particularly when capitalist society deploys a successful capacity of integrating differences through the market and institutional identity politics. hooks’ critical engagement with the latter does not abstractly deny the oppositional capacity of politicized identities, but rather contextualizes it by highlighting the risk of self-segregating into the position of the “native informant,” that is—again in Spivak’s terms—the blank space generative of a cultural identity whose text is written by the discourse of domination.⁴⁹ History, therefore, should oppose all processes of decontextualization that turn the past into the fictional support of a presumed purity, where the binary opposition between the dominant and the dominated is granted by their representation as essential, homogeneous unities, i.e. through the denial of the social relations which cut identities in two.

This clear insight into the critical, polemical capacity of history coexists aporetically with hooks’ tension towards an aestheticization, if not essentialization, of the past. Her emphasis on ancestral worldviews—like the African one, which made “idleness” a time of contemplation rather than a mark of guilt, or those shared by Blacks and Native Americans, linked by “bonds of blood and metaphysical kinship,”—just like the memory of the “communalism” experienced by the segregated Black communities, always aims to find resources for establishing political connections of solidarity. Rather than unveiling history as a polemical field, however, these representations run the risk of multiplying memories and their contingency, of turning re-remembering into a consumable commemoration⁵⁰ while denying the possibility of acting in the present for changing the future into a revival of a mythical past of pre-capitalist communities or pre-colonial bonds of solidarity. Even if the past is invoked as the evidence of practicable alternatives to the existing system of oppression and exploitation, this

46. Gilroy, foreword, xi.

47. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 45, 245 and *Uncut Funk*, 37. From this viewpoint, hooks does not claim for any ‘sanitarization’ or moralization of history, which conservative and far-right opponents of the so-called “cancel culture” denounce in order to delegitimize it and win their position in the contemporary “culture war.” See Michele Cento, “Passare a contrappello la storia. Il mestiere dello storico ai tempi della *cancel culture*,” *Paradoxa 2* (2022) 39–54. hooks’ critique of the idealization of the pre-capitalist past focuses on Ivan Illich, but it can also be properly applied to contemporary streams of thought such as Walter Mignolo’s and Silvia Federici’s decolonial discourses.

48. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 49.

49. hooks defines “native informants” those Black intellectuals who confirm the whites’ expectations of feeling irresponsible for racism (*Black Looks*, 15). This conception coincides with the ethnographic one discussed by Spivak. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MS: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

50. On the relationship between history, memory, remembering and commemoration, read through the problematic lens of “presentism,” that is of a regime of historicity where the present time—the time of the event, the time of consumption, the *real* time of mass and social media—becomes omnipresent, shaping the way in which the past, the future and their relationship are conceived, see François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), part. *Memory, History and the Present*.

does not explain how to overcome the effects of white supremacy, which has broken all bonds of solidarity by triggering competition among social and ethnic groups. Even arguing that “memory sustains a spirit of resistance,”⁵¹ it is unclear how this can happen when memories not only do not provide any shared past, but also multiply in the context of transnational white supremacist patriarchy. If it is true that “subversion requires strategy,” and “simply stating the case is not enough,”⁵² then history requires a theory in order to drive a politics of articulation.

In hook’s discourse, the feminist perspective provides this strategical theory without relying on ancestral pasts. In writing her feminist history of North American capitalism, hooks did not conceive the epistemological standpoint whence storytelling spread as essential or authentic. Being neither given or homogeneous, the perspective of the Black woman allowed her to highlight the social operativity of race and sex in the production of hierarchies articulated by contemporary capitalism as an overall system of oppression and exploitation. The politics of the margin is the theoretical and political translation of this epistemological standpoint. Far from being only an objective condition, the margin is the site from which to actively formulate an “oppositional worldview” that makes manifest both the lines that divide and oppose the oppressed and the oppressors, and their interconnections in a contradictory system of socially determined hierarchies. The partial perspective of the Black woman over the totality of social relations offers the possibility of politicizing *a* difference against the capitalist and multicultural valorization of differences, because it is the standpoint from which a feminist discourse that activates political interconnections against social reproduction could spread. As the practice of a political discourse, feminism should be up to the challenge of turning these connections into social antagonism, pushing even those who, in different ways, are “at the center” to take a stand.⁵³

This anti-essentialist stance is what makes the politics of the margin a living possibility for the present, within a post-colonial context in which, as hooks observes, the new forms of class power for women are based on the exploitation of migrants under conditions of institutionalized “indentured slavery,” and new anti-immigrant forms of white supremacy emerge among the working poor.⁵⁴ To meet bell hook’s ambition to make feminism a “mass-based movement,”⁵⁵ the politics of the margin should today deal with the transnational mobility that puts identities in trouble. By speaking the unspeakable, tackling the uncomfortable subject of class in this increasingly complex transnational disorder, feminist theory could help to go beyond the claims for partial redresses, which require an aggressive defense of identities based on victimhood. In this way, it can aspire—as bell hooks did—to become a movement “that has as its fundamental goal” not only women’s liberation, but “the liberation of all people,”⁵⁶ envisioning the possibility of changing an oppressive present where domination and exploitation are represented as unavoidable.

51. hooks, *Black Looks*, 90, 183–184, 191.

52. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

53. bell hooks, *Yearning Race, Gender and Cultural politics* [1990] (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 22, 149 ff; hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 15. For a discussion of the political meaning of “the margin,” see Mako Fitts, “Theorizing Transformative Revolutionary Action: The Contribution of bell hooks to Emancipatory Knowledge Production,” *The CLR James Journal* 17 (2011), 112–132.

54. hooks, *Class Matter*, 109.

55. hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, 8.

56. hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 13.