

*THIRD WORLD VIEWPOINT: You have written extensively on feminist issues and on racial oppression in America, and your analyses are always thoughtful and incisive but, in terms of being an intellectual in the elitist sense of the word, does it bother you that the masses of African American women and men may, perhaps, not get a chance to know who bell hooks is; may not be reading your material that has so much to say about the struggles that they are engaged in?*

BELL HOOKS: I think that I am a lucky person in that I get a lot of feedback from those "masses." I think that we have such stereotypical notions of working people. There are a lot of Black working people who read and, in fact, 20 years ago, long before white feminists were receiving my work and applauding it, I counted on that basic Black population, particularly Black women who went to the library and checked out my books and wrote to me. My concern is to enlarge that audience, particularly to reach young Black people between the ages of 15 and 25 who are the reading population but who are least likely, maybe, to hear of a bell hooks.

Part of my desire to do that has led me to go to magazines that ordinarily I might not be that engaged with politically, I want Black people to know that there are insurgent Black intellectual voices that are addressing our needs as a people who must have renewed liberation struggle.

*Let us talk about the concept of patriarchy about which you write and talk a lot. Patriarchy is a notion of society being dominated by men. Clearly, patriarchy also existed before there was capitalism. Do you believe that the overthrow of capitalism has within it the seeds for ending patriarchy and thus the oppression of women?*

I think that what we see globally is that there have been incredible struggles to combat capitalism that haven't resulted in an end to patriarchy at all. I also think that when we study ancient societies that were not capitalist we see hierarchical systems that privileged maleness in the way that modern patriarchy does. I think we will never destroy patriarchy without questioning, critiquing, and challenging capitalism, and I don't think challenging capitalism alone will mean a better world for women.

*How do you combine the struggle against patriarchy and against capitalism?*

I think that strategically, we have to start on all fronts. For example, I'm very concerned that there are not more Black women deeply committed to anti-capitalist politics. But one would have to understand the role that gender oppression plays in encouraging young Black females to think that they don't need to study about capitalism. That they don't need to read men who were my teachers like Walter Rodney, and Nkrumah, and Amilcar Cabral.

I think that as a girl who grew up in a patriarchal, working-class, Black, southern household there was a

convergence of those issues of class and gender. I was acutely aware of my class, and I was acutely aware of the limitations imposed on me by gender. I wouldn't be the committed worker for freedom that I am today had I not begun to oppose that gendered notion of learning that suggests that politics is the realm of males and that political thinking about anti-racist struggle and colonialism is for men.

I'm very much in favor of the kind of education for critical consciousness that says: Let's not look at these things separately. Let's look at how they converge so that when we begin to take a stand against them, we can take that kind of strategic stance that allows us to be self-determining as a people struggling in a revolutionary way on all fronts.

*In terms of your own political development, would you say that your analysis is informed by a Marxist critique of capitalist society?*

Absolutely. I think Marxist thought--the work of people like Gramsci--is very crucial to educating ourselves for political consciousness. That doesn't mean we have to take the sexism or the racism that comes out of those thinkers and disregard it. It means that we extract the resources from their thought that can be useful to us in struggle. A class rooted analysis is where I begin in all my work. The fact is that it was bourgeois white feminism that I was reacting against when I stood in my first women's studies classes and said, "Black women have always worked." It was a class-biased challenge to the structure of feminism.

*So you would encourage women to get organizationally involved in the struggle against the capitalist system and against gender oppression?*

Absolutely. In my newest book, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, one of the big issues I deal with is the degree to which capitalism is being presented as the answer. When people focus on the white mass media's obsession with Louis Farrakhan, they think the media hate Farrakhan so much. But they don't hate Farrakhan. They love him. One of the reasons why they love him is that he's totally pro-capitalist. There is a tremendous overlap in the values of a Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam and the values of the white, Christian right. Part of it is their pro-capitalism, their patriarchy, and their whole-hearted support of homophobia.

Farrakhan's pro-capitalism encourages a kind of false consciousness in Black life. For example, you have a Rapper like Ice T in his new book, *The Ice Opinions*, making an astute class analysis when he says that "People live in the ghetto not because they're Black, but because they're poor." But then he goes on to offer capitalism as a solution. This means that he has a total gap in his understanding if he imagines that becoming rich within this society--individual wealth--is somehow a way to redeem Black life. The only hope for us to redeem the material lives of Black people is a call for the redistribution of wealth and resources which is not only a critique of capitalism, but an incredible challenge to capitalism.

*You bemoan the fact that you don't see enough women playing leading roles in political organizations--on the left, in particular. But, in terms of the possibilities of women on the left organizing independently from a feminist perspective, it would seem to me that a number of reasons might be offered to explain this, one of*

*them being that Black men, even though they are sexist, are not perceived to be in control of the levers of power in this society, so that it becomes problematic for Black women in terms of organizing separately as Black women?*

I would disagree that my political standpoint begins with feminism. My political standpoint begins with the notion of Black self-determination. In order for me to engage in a revolutionary struggle for collective Black self-determination, I have to engage feminism because that becomes the vehicle by which I project myself as a female into the heart of the struggle, but the heart of the struggle does not begin with feminism. It begins with an understanding of domination and with a critique of domination in all its forms. I think it is, in fact, a danger to think of the starting point as being feminism.

I think we need a much more sophisticated vision of what it means to have a radical political consciousness. That is why I stress so much the need for African Americans to take on a political language of colonialism. We owe such a great debt to people like CLR James and the great thinkers in the African Diaspora who have encouraged us to frame our issues in a larger political context that looks at imperialism and colonialism and our place as Africans in the Diaspora so that class becomes a central factor.

*In terms of the need for consciousness of Black women and men to be raised about the issues of gender, what kind of program do you think should be addressed?*

I think we equally need Black men to be feminist teachers educating for critical consciousness. I'm actually for a more communal division of labor. If we have a community where people seem to be more hip about gender, but not very hip about class, then I think that we need to strategically go for that framework of understanding which is missing, rather than to assume that one framework should always be centered on.

I believe that Black women are very susceptible to bourgeois hedonistic consumerism because women are so much the targets of mass media. So, clearly, a lot of critical thinking about materialism in our lives is crucial to engaging Black women in revolutionary struggle. So that class, again, comes up and we haven't had enough Black women leaders.

But the point is, we need to also know how some of these women, many of whom came from bourgeois families, began to acquire a more revolutionary consciousness--if, indeed, they have acquired that consciousness. It's also easier, a lot of times, for Black women to talk about gender and ignore class because many of us are non-divesting of our support of capitalism and our longing for luxury. I think that it's one thing to enjoy the good life and to enjoy beauty and things, and another thing to feel like you're willing to support the killing of other people in other countries so that you can have your fine car and other luxuries.

*You have, in effect, through your answers explained the difference between your politics, and, let us say, white feminist politics.*

Well, I would say "some white feminist politics," because I can think of revolutionary feminists who are white. We don't hear much from revolutionary feminists who are white because they're not serving the bourgeois agenda of the status quo. They're a small minority, but they are there and they are useful allies in the struggle. So I try not to use those monolithic terms anymore that I used in the beginning with *Ain't I a Woman*

because I was 19-years-old when I was writing that book and it reflected a certain degree of political naivete. I am now much more acutely aware of the need for us not to lump all white feminist thinkers together because there are a small group of revolutionary women who are activists in struggle and are more deeply our allies than the mainstream white feminists we hear so much about.

*So we should put to rest the notion that feminism is about pitting men against women?*

In *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center* I said that if you think of feminism as a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression, there is nothing about men in there. To me, a woman can't be a feminist just because she is a woman. She is a feminist because she begins to divest herself of sexist ways of thinking and revolutionizes her consciousness. The same is true for the male comrade in struggle.

One would think, as in the case of racism, that it's more in the interest of the woman to develop a feminist consciousness, but that's the only way in which I think that women have a greater claim to feminism than men. I feel sad that we have allowed these knee-jerk feminists who want to act like it's a struggle against men—but again that's the least politically developed strand of feminism. That is the strand of feminism that people most hear about, not the kind of revolutionary feminism that says, patriarchy is life threatening to Black men. When we look at the Black men who are killing each other—who think that their dick is a gun, and a gun is a dick—those men need a critique of that notion of patriarchal masculinity to save their lives. Feminism as a political movement has to specifically address the needs of men in their struggle to revolutionize their consciousness.

*In your first book Ain't I a Woman you took Amiri Baraka to task for his sexist views and his sexist politics. As a result of more outspokenness by you and others, do you see a change developing in the Black community among Black men?*

I think that we certainly have seen tremendous changes in Black males. But one of the difficulties is that Black, gay men—I'm thinking particularly of Essex Hemphill, Joseph Bean, and Marlon Riggs—who have been at the forefront of critiquing sexism are not looked on as leaders, as they should be, in our community. When a Marlon Riggs makes a film like *Tongues Untied*, where he talks about the place of silence in the construction of Black masculinity (he keeps repeating that line, "Silence is my weapon, silence is my shield"), he's not just talking about gay men who use silence. When we look at Black men, in general, in intimate and personal relations, we see the inability to communicate feelings, emotions, in relation to the people they care about, as a problem. I can't think of anything that a straight Black man has made that tries to speak to that need of Black men to break through the wall of silence, and to speak about the range of issues that affects their lives as deeply as Marlon in *Tongues Untied*.

And yet, again, even though it has been on PBS, a lot of Black people will see "gay," and they

won't go any further with it. That's tragic because gays have so much to offer.

*Is the Black community any more homophobic than the white community?*

The rhetoric of nationalism is totally homophobic, and to the degree that contemporary Black people are engaged in escapist, non-political, non-revolutionary fantasies of nationalism and the patriarchal family, we are more aggressively homophobic than the larger culture where there are a lot of white liberals and leftists who are not interested in nationalism.

*In terms of where we are in the 1990s, are you optimistic? Do you see on the horizon the seeds of a future regeneration of Black, political radicalism?*

I see a hunger, especially among Black youth, for more sophisticated answers. Unfortunately, right now, it's narrow nationalism, narrow forms of Afrocentrism, that are mostly addressing that hunger. Our leading people buy into utopian fantasies of liberation, when in fact our liberation should come from a concrete struggle in the workforce, no fantasies about ancient Africa, and kings and queens. Not that we don't need to know about ancient Africa to address the biases of Western education.

People forget that the militant struggles of the 1960s were profoundly anti-capitalist. Even Martin Luther King reached a point, before his death, in *A Testament of Hope*, when he was saying we must be anti-militarist; we must critique capitalism. That has somehow gotten lost in the mix, and I think that this embracing of capitalist ethic of liberal individualism has done more to diffuse Black people's capacity to struggle for freedom, than any other factor.

On the other hand, when I go to give a talk and there are many more Black men than ever before. There are many more Black people, so it says to me that there is also a burgeoning group of Black people who are ready to educate for critical consciousness, in a more powerful, revolutionary way. The question will be: how many of us will rise as insurgent, revolutionary, Black intellectuals, to be the teachers, and to be the leaders, and to be the people who make certain sacrifices to bring certain insights. We have to think of political insight as a resource that we bring to our diverse Black communities and to our lives.

*You are also a cultural critic. There are a lot of Black movies out now--do you think these films are addressing the needs of Black people at this time?*

I was told, for example, by a lot of Black people, "Oh, you must see *Sankofa*," Haile Gerima's film. Then I saw that film and I thought, this script of slavery comes right out of *Gone with the Wind*.

It has moments where it affirms Black self-determination, but it's so sentimental when it comes to gender. We have the sacrificing Black mother who, truly, has a revolutionary consciousness and is not going to go

chasing after some retrograde, self-hating mulatto son in the way we see that Black woman doing. It's kind of sad that this is our vision of a film that begins to address our issues because, once again, it's on such a banal level.

I think it is worth discussing how useful are fictional narratives of slavery to us in a culture where people don't know their actual history. I'm much more interested in students reading and knowing the speeches and text of Malcolm X, the person, than going to see that garbled, crossover, colonized version of Spike Lee's. Until people have concretely studied the teachings of a Malcolm X or a Martin Luther King, it's dangerous to have fiction become the primary learning point.

*I guess there's still a very strong nationalist hold over us*

That's a good point. I think nationalism is a non-progressive world vision right now. I think that nationalism is different from Black self-determination because, of course, any vision of Black self-determination that is rooted in a class analysis and a critique of sexism unites us with the struggles of, not only Black people, globally, for liberation, but all oppressed people.

I think that nationalism has undermined revolutionary Black struggle. It's no accident that people like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were destroyed at those moments of their political careers when they had begun to critique nationalism as a platform of organization; and where, in fact, they replace nationalism with a critique of imperialism; which then, unites us with the liberation struggles of so many people on the planet. If we don't have that kind of global perspective about our social realities, we will never be able to re-envision a revolutionary movement for Black self-determination that is non-exclusive, and doesn't assume some kind of patriarchal nationhood. Many of our African nations have failed precisely because they lacked a revolutionary vision for social change that worked, and not because they didn't have a nation. So, Black Americans must be very, very cautious in embracing the notion of a nation as the redemptive location. The redemptive location lies in our radical politics and the strategies by which we implement those radical politics--not with the formation of a nation.