

## Book Reviews

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### hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

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*Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* is both honest reflection and astute analysis of the continued persistence of white supremacy that pervades our culture. This book is a must read for those who find themselves working against a foe that continues to reshape and manifest itself. bell hooks writes this for those who participate in the struggle to identify and work towards the elimination of racism, sexism, and classism. She poignantly reaffirms what many of us know through our everyday lives, our work in the classroom, and our work with language; despite the circulating discourse of the post-racial, race lives.

hooks reminds us that even with the gains made in feminist theory and cultural criticism towards “moving beyond the barriers created by race, gender, class, sexuality, and/or religious differences” our theories have yet to catch up to our everyday lives. The gap between theory and practice persists: “We write more about theory than we do about practice. It has simply been easier to do theory than to put into real-life practice what we declare as the work of ending domination” (144). hooks does not deny that theory-making isn’t a challenge as well, but instead suggests that “it was easier to name the problem and to deconstruct it, and yet it was hard to create theories that would help us build community, help us border cross with the intention of truly remaining connected in a space of difference long enough to be transformed” (2). This book of eighteen essays presents her “efforts to look at the ways race, gender, and class are written and talked about today” (7). Her aim is not only to call our attention to these conversations, but also to encourage us to imagine and enact transformations that might make it possible to “bond across differences” and “to think and write beyond the boundaries which keep us all overracialized” (8).

While conversations about the post-racial have happened since the initial election of President Barack Obama, many of us know that this is just wishful (un)thinking. Race is present. Whether it be through the use of disrespectful mascots or the continued “us” and “them” discourse in the media that attempts to devalue and other us into division and paranoia, despite calls heralding our entrance into a post-racial world, our present reality and experiences continue to be grounded in racial constructs. It is also present in what

I call its “innocuous stealth state” where it almost slips past us if it weren’t for that feeling that rises in the pits of our stomachs that tells us something here just isn’t right. How do we move past race? What would that even look like? hooks offers a response that encourages us to both imagine and act. While each of the chapters is an individual essay and can be read or presented as such, three themes emerged across chapters that speak to the actions needed to move towards transformation: naming and defining, embracing solidarity, and writing beyond race.

We are living in an era where discussions about race and identity are difficult to have, both cross-racially and intra-racially, because of the politics of class and the steady resistance of some to admit that America is a country where, as hooks says, “white supremacist thinking and practice has been the political foundation undergirding all systems of domination based on skin color and ethnicity” (3-4). To *move beyond race* requires both acknowledgement and naming. To end the process of domination means that we must recognize the system that holds this all together. She acknowledges that while “the subjects of race, gender, and class are still talked about,” her focus is to move conversations (and most importantly actions) towards work that will allow us to make real transformation because current conversations “are more and more divorced from discussions of ending biases in standpoint...” (7).

In “Racism: Naming What Hurts,” we are reminded that until we can understand and identify racism and the power that it holds, we will do little to move past it. She argues that claims about the eradication of racism stem from an idea that many (white) Americans no longer see racism. As hooks explains, its not so much that whites would argue that racism doesn’t exist, but that some might challenge the notion that it affects blacks more than anyone else and therefore is no longer “a meaningful threat to anyone’s well-being” (10). hooks describes this as part of the attitude that perpetuates race. The second comes from a lack of coming to terms with America’s racial history. The fact that America is a country founded on what she calls “white supremacist thinking” and that this ideology informs all of our lives but is neither a history, nor a concept, that many want to acknowledge (11). She implores us to name racism and to call it out, as the first step in moving past it towards “discussions of race and racism [that] would be based on a foundation of concrete reality” (12).

So what is our problem? Why can’t we *all* see the system, name it, and move beyond? hooks believes that America’s insistence on being “the most democratic nation in the world” is part of the reason. She reminds us that while it might be easy to see racism in other “non-democratic” nations we can’t see this within ourselves. Her message here is strong and echoes in the chapters that follow: “As long as this nation absolutely refuses to accurately name

white supremacy then the roots of racism will remain strong" (13). In the wake of naming and acknowledgment, we will have shifted our perspective from the belief that race "has happened" or "only happens to *them*" and be able to understand the ways that it manifests in the lives of *everyone*. She also believes that this acknowledgement will allow us to more fully embrace diversity as we move past language that increases blaming and division.

Through the essay "Moving Past Blame: Embracing Diversity" hooks reminds us that while diversity is necessary for survival, the mere presence of difference does not challenge institutional racism. To embrace diversity means that we part from dualistic thinking that encourages the adversarial us/them paradigm, one of the primary obstacles to embracing diversity. The real transformation has to occur in our consciousness: "When we are more energized by the practice of blaming than we are by efforts to create transformation, we not only cannot find relief from suffering, we are creating the conditions that help keep us stuck in the status quo" (29). This perpetuates "dualistic thinking" (30) which continues to argue that there must always be "the oppressed and the oppressor, a victim and a victimizer," creating a culture of blame (30).

hooks continues her discussion on the work of embracing diversity with a warning about the dangers of thinking that one can "simply add color and stir." I found this particularly poignant for us in Rhetoric and Composition as an important reminder of how we might approach and reflect on our own practices of curriculum crafting to meet the needs of our student populations. hooks has this to say about program development and literacy: "Let us imagine that from the moment changing demographics became part of public awareness, public schools had created a curriculum that would require all students to learn Spanish, so that bilingual language skills would be acknowledged as a preferred norm. Then diversity would be affirmed" (28). This message is also relevant for the development of departments and workspaces as well. Indeed, we must build curricula and writing programs that welcome and respectfully utilize the experiences, epistemologies, languages, and literacies of the students in our classrooms. This calls for a kind of deep listening on the part of the instructors and administrators.

In addition to considering the place of literacy education and programs with regard to diversity, hooks puts forth a special message about the challenges women face with regard to embracing solidarity and talking about race: "When the issue of race is talked about in the United States it has always been seen as a contest between men" (39). She reminds us: "ultimately women do much of the hands-on work, as parents, as teachers, as cultural workers" (39). This is not to offer praise or blame for one group over the other, but instead to show that "as a consequence of this gendered work, women of all races teach white supremacist thought and practice" (39) and women of all colors,

as well as men, are responsible for the work it takes to change. Once we can acknowledge that white supremacist thought and practice are so entrenched in our cultures and communities, “we would all need to look at the ways we are accountably for continually creating and maintaining this system of domination” by looking at the roles that women play in perpetuating such a system (39). While the feminist movement has moved conversations about race to the forefront hooks suggests that a more critical examination of the relationships between women would show how patriarchy has transmitted a history of black and white women being “pitted against one another by dominator culture in ways that serve to maintain the status quo” (40). The replication of these relationships and perpetual circulation of only those types of stories thwart attempts at solidarity.

However, hooks believes that “small circles of the visionary feminist movement” have worked towards recognizing, naming, and resisting negative stereotypes mainstream culture has continued to push forward “sentimental notions of sisterhood” that don’t allow us to unite and tackle racism (48-9). The sentimental notions that are replicated through pop culture generally do not recognize the complicated work that goes into sisterhood, nor do they present us with the types of solidarity necessary for political change. hooks’ call for us to unite in solidarity and challenge white supremacy is not a romantic notion, but grounded in a call for action for both imagining and doing anti-racist work. Her analysis of race presents itself in pop culture moments, suggesting that our work not just be limited to one sphere. We need multiple occurrences of recognizing, naming, and working in solidarity towards troubling the single-story that we are often narrated.

hooks uses several essays to examine contemporary representations of race that continue to lack the depth and complication needed to name race, embrace diversity, and bring us towards solidarity. In “Help Wanted: Re-Imagining The Past” she analyzes how the book and subsequent film adaptation of *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett do little to reveal the story of race and racism in the Deep South. hooks writes: “Like the early sentimental novels her work resembles, she distorts, exaggerates, and generally misrepresents the lives of southern white women and black female domestics in order to create a world of female cruelty where sisterhood and solidarity triumph in the end” (58-59). In addition to simplifying the complicated histories and relationships between black and white women, the “re-positioning” of the story casts the civil rights movement as “a struggle that is entirely taking place between vicious unenlightened white women and exploited black female domestics” (59). hooks suggests that we be fearful of stories like *The Help* and others that reduce, simplify, and continue the same story because “they erase and deny the long and powerful history of the individual radical white women active in

the civil rights struggle" (68). While she acknowledges that historical fiction may not always be accurate, it is nonetheless possible that it can "indeed offer alternative and transformative visions" (70).

She offers a similar rigorous analysis of Manning Marable's Malcolm X biography in "Interrogating: The Reinvention of Malcolm X." She criticizes Marable's biography for its use of "gossipy speculation" (72). Citing claims that the biography would "tell all" and the coverage of the press that promised the book would "reveal the man behind the mask and expose to the world that Malcolm X was more trickster con artist than astute political observer" (77), hooks argues that portions of Marable's biography borders on sensationalism and further serves "the interest of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy's continued racist/sexist assault on black masculinity" (80). The complexity of Malcolm X's life is lost to gossip and stories that seek to undermine his authority and power.

Following suit, her examination of Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* points to the need for self-reflection on the part of the author: "More often than not when works focus on race and gender are created with no attention given to whether the perspective are simply reproduced and re-inscribed" (83). hooks critiques Skloot's work for lacking depth and analysis of the role race played in the Lacks story: "By failing to offer a more complex interpretation, she falls into the trap of reinscribing simplistic notions of black identity" (84). This results in the creation of the stereotyped framing of Lacks "in the usual racist and sexist ways of 'seeing' black females—flirtatious and loose, lacking knowledge about their own body, and with little concern for what it takes to be a responsible mother" (84). hooks' critique points again to the importance of seeing and identifying the many ways that race seeps into stories that are seemingly "aware" or "progressive."

In two dialogues with filmmaker Gilda Sheppard, hooks describes the ways in which *Crash* (2004) and *Precious* (2009) fail to offer progressive takes on racism, despite claims from critics and directors that these films would push the envelope. Their conversations show that despite the intention of the filmmakers, there is still much work to be done to tell the real, messy, and complicated stories of race and hooks criticizes both for perpetuating the same stereotypes and images rather than challenging and disrupting them. hooks reflects that while *Crash* was regarded by many as a public narrative about racism, neither *Crash* nor *Precious* challenge stereotypes and instead reinforce many, specifically racial ones. hooks calls this "plantation culture," likening it to the days when slaves grew and maintained agriculture for white plantation owners, but were still fed slop or leftovers: "Ironically, today black folks with class privilege produce the slop and sell it back to us; if we so choose we too can be colonizers. *Precious* exemplifies this plantation culture—its

makers and marketers have been black folks" (125). Quite simply, these types of simplifications in books and films continue to perpetuate race.

The remaining essays in the book shift from close analysis to discussions on developing practice to support theory. hooks asks us to think about the ways bonding and true transformation can occur, all the while reiterating how difficult it can be to practice our theories: "Our silence about practice surfaced because no one really wanted to talk about the difficulties of bonding across differences, the breakdowns in communications, the disappointments, the betrayals" (143). For hooks, to embrace solidarity comes from active listening, allowing people to share their experiences, and honest reflection that allows for critical feedback. The final essays of this collection, "Writing Beyond Race," and "The Practice of Love," offer one of the most intriguing facets about hooks' life as activist, theorist, and intellectual. She offers reflection about what aspects of her work gain the most traction: "After writing and publishing more than twenty books, looking retrospectively at my writing careers, at my work as a feminist theorist and cultural critic, I can see that it is the writing that moves beyond race that receives little attention" (190). Her rationale for why this happens goes back to the importance of solidarity. By placing her work in categories that further deny the complexity of writing and working towards anti-racists theories and practices, she is reduced to being a critic but not an activist who seeks to move beyond what she has critiqued. Her ultimate desire is to not only theorize about ending racism, sexism, and classism, but to put actions to her words.

How do we move beyond race? To move past this moment and history hooks suggests that we think about and enact the "transformative power of love" as a means to "accept the fullness of our humanity, which then allows us to recognize the humanity of others" (198). It is through the recognition that ethnicity and color are "but one fragment of a holistic identity" (198) that we can "know ourselves beyond race, beyond the tenets of white supremacist logic" (198). For hooks, living in love is the only way to resist race and move beyond it: "Domination will never end as long as we are all taught to devalue love" (198). We would be well advised to heed this powerful call so we can continue to address the needs and complexities of our students, departments, and communities because, as hooks reminds us throughout this book, despite popular notions to the contrary, white supremacy continues to entrench itself and is becoming more pervasive. We must remain vigilant and not take for granted that the battle was only won in the past.

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## About the Author

Candace Epps-Robertson is an assistant professor in Michigan State University's Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. Her research examines the rhetorical practices and strategies of marginalized and oppressed groups. Currently, she is working on a book-length project titled, "We're Still Here!": The Prince Edward County Free School Association, 1963-1964," in which she argues that this school functioned as a counter rhetoric to the discourse of Massive Resistance. She has an article forthcoming in *Literacy in Composition Studies*, and an interview essay with Edward Peeples in *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning* (Spring 2014).