

Introducing bell hooks

**Asma Barlas
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Welcome; thank you for coming. I'm Asma Barlas and I teach politics here at Ithaca College and I'm also currently the director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. Today is the second event in our discussion series on race that the Center is co-sponsoring with the office of the Provost, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Cinema on the Edge program.

The discussion series is meant to facilitate a campus wide dialogue on race, in particular, the history and meanings of race and racism, racial politics, and the problematic of representation. It is this last area-of representation and images-that is the topic of this evening's session.

Our guest speaker tonight is bell hooks, celebrated feminist scholar, poet, social critic, and public intellectual. She is an original and prolific writer who is best known for her "deconstructive analyses of race and gender and her advocacy of black female fortitude." Ms hooks first came to prominence in the early 1980s with *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, which is ranked among the 20 most important women's books of the last two decades. Her other works are too numerous to list-she has authored 22 books-but include *Black Looks*, *Feminist Theory*, *Talking Back*, *Teaching to Transgress*, *Class Matters*, *Breaking Bread*, and most recently, *All about Love and Salvation*.

Ms hooks, let me confess that I have thought quite a bit about how to do a credible job of introducing you given the presence in the audience of so many feminists and even some friends of yours who know you and your work from a different vantage point than I do.

As someone who came to the US in the 1980s, I have not shared the definitive experiences of segregation, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the feminist movement that shaped the sensibilities of so many women of my generation here, including your own. I cannot, therefore, speak as a cultural insider.

Indeed, I don't even speak as a feminist because I find most feminisms in the West too heavily implicated in various forms of Othering, specially where it comes to Muslim women.

I am also somewhat ambiguously situated in the racial hierarchy, being neither white nor black, the two axes along which most of the theorizing about race has tended to take place. And, yet, I am made ever more aware, almost daily, of the ways in which race impacts my life.

And, finally, as a Muslim woman, I belong to that group of people that calls itself “believers” in a society where one needs to renounce the idea of God in order to be considered an intellectual.

It was in thinking of my marginality vis-à-vis not only the dominant white US culture, but even yourself, that I realized that perhaps your introduction at my hands may be the best tribute to someone who has occupied as many margins simultaneously as you have in your life.

Having listed some of the ways in which we differ, let me now count the ways in which your work has, in fact, shaped my sensibilities thus persuading me of the truth of your claim that one can reach “across the boundaries of class, gender, and race” to construct mutual understanding.

As someone engaged in a critique of Muslim patriarchal readings of Islam, I share a fear that you articulated a while ago-and from here on I’m going to use many of your words as my own-that with my work “I enter a discourse, a practice, where there may be no ready audience for my words, no clear listener, uncertain, then, that my voice can or will be heard” (PMB 1990)

Shared uncertainties are no less necessary for creating solidarities than shared certainties and by admitting your anxieties, you have also opened up to question the “absence of doubt” that marks so much work in the academy, including feminist work and work that you call “radically chic.”

And yet, in spite of my fears, like you, I have chosen to press on, believing that I have a right to talk back and to adopt gestures of defiance that I feel are necessary for piercing “the wall of denial” that exists in all sexist and racist cultures.

Your work has helped me to realize that the reason I don’t see myself reflected in the works of white feminists is because of their tendency to mask “acts of racist aggression as affirmation,” including, most notably, their embrace of women of color as sister-Other.

It is through your conceptual lens that I have learned to recognize how difference itself has been exoticized and commodified and how this commodification permits the consumption of the Other.

Like you, I have viewed moments of anger and pain as moments also of self-acknowledgment and clarification. Unlike you, however, I want to dwell for a while longer in this place of anger before I can undertake that journey to love that you feel can liberate us from rage.

It is your critique of representation that most enables me to understand the limits to which I can explain what it means to be a Muslim in the US today, in the face

of a 1,400 year long history of representations of Muslims as everything from the antiChrist to terrorists.

Your work first helped me to understand how the “liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (the idea that we are all people)” can enable and abet a politics of domination and how one may defend standpoint epistemologies without giving in to essentialism.

Most of all, your work reaffirms me in my belief that I need to speak out on behalf of ideas I value, no matter how unpopular, to embrace my doubts and fears as a way to understand myself and others better, to choose political solidarities with integrity, and to continue to struggle against the “culture of cultivated naiveté” (as a friend calls it) that exists here.

What more credible introduction can I give you in the absence of shared histories, experiences, and epistemologies than to acknowledge your profound credibility in my own life and the ways in which your work has formed my sense of self and as a result of which you endure within me?

bell hooks, welcome to Ithaca College.