Sisterhood: Beyond Public and Private

bell hooks with Tanya McKinnon

DURING MOST OF THE more than twenty years that I have spent as a critical thinker, writing conventional literary criticism, annotated according to the MLA style sheet, as well as the unconventional feminist theory and cultural criticism that has been my claim to fame such as it is, I was not in the public eye. Like many women of my generation, I finished my Ph.D. late. My experience of graduate school was somewhat unconventional in that I had already written and published *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) before I wrote my dissertation on Toni Morrison's first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). I wanted most to be a writer, but also an academic. While these two conflicting desires created tensions and anxiety, the longing to be a writer enabled me to rebel against the academic status quo.

While it is exciting that I have fulfilled my childhood dream both of being a writer and having a successful academic career, one of the dilemmas I now confront as I receive more and more attention in both alternative and mainstream media is the issue of representation. Because so much of the work I have done within feminist theory and cultural studies critically interrogates the way images are constructed to perpetuate and maintain sexism and racism, I am utterly mindful of the way in which my own understanding of what it is to be a black woman insurgent intellectual/writer is increasingly subordinated to the way in which I am represented by various structures of that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy I have spent my adult life critiquing. Let me give one example. Recently, I was asked to do a profile with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Leatherman 1995). Approached by a *Chronicle* reporter, I agreed. She showed up quite early in the morning at the door of my West Village apartment in New York City. She shared that she was a native of Kentucky, like myself, and that she wanted to observe both my professional work in the classroom and the world behind the scenes. Because I live with no sense that I have anything either to hide or to be ashamed of, I was quite wel-

This interview was conducted on January 21, 1995.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1996, vol. 21, no. 4]
 0097-9740/96/2104-0001$01.00

coming, and all the more so because she understood something of the world in which I grew up. Her whiteness was not a barrier to my sharing. I welcomed her with the Southern hospitality of my upbringing. She talked with some of my students, to those in my class and to one, a working-class black female student from City College, whom I had encouraged to take my course at the graduate center (so that she could see that she was just as capable of excelling in graduate school as her peers from different class backgrounds). When the *Chronicle* reporter wrote her story, she left out all the information my students had given her about how I work with them as an intellectual mentor. She made the defining characteristics of my engagement with them, not the academic work we do together, but silly personal details that she had observed only because my students and I had happily included her in our "downtime" lunch at my place. The thrust of her piece was that I was merely a seductive "black madonna"–type icon—all flash and no substance. Her piece disturbed. While I am quite seductive, my powers of seduction are not needed with students who need academic help, many of whom grapple with self-esteem problems that interfere with their capacity to realize their intellectual potential. Our work centers around ideas. The fact that we may have fun together when the work is done does not change the reality that it is rigorous and often painful for many of the students with whom I work, be they black, nonblack people of color, or white, to change their paradigms, to begin to think differently about race, gender, and class—to encounter feminist thinking for the first time. There was no student or colleague of mine with whom this reporter talked who did not share a sense of this rigor or the constructive impact it has had on her or his intellectual growth. That this reporter chose to represent me in a false and distorted light seemed to me merely part of the overall mainstream mocking of both feminist thought and women's studies, which is one way the conservative backlash is attacking the work we do. Frankly, the vampish tabloid-like portrait she painted of me had to be invented because the reality of watching me work for a long day was infinitely more boring.

I have given this example as a preface to my interview with Tanya McKinnon because it is rare that I am given an opportunity to talk with a progressive black female and to have some control over the way I am represented. Tanya, a graduate student in anthropology at the New School for Social Research, suggested that she conduct this interview precisely because she felt that there are aspects of my identity and work that are never talked about. Although Tanya has never been a student of mine, I have known her for more than ten years. I first met her when she was an undergraduate at Tufts University. I went there to give a talk, and she was among the group of students with whom I had an informal discussion at the university's African-American cultural center. The students were

from diverse backgrounds. Tanya impressed me because of her insight and capacity for critical thought. Yet she seemed to be self-effacing. Later, at a dinner with black women students held in my honor, I found she lingered in the background. Encouraging her to sit next to me, I affirmed her intelligence and encouraged her to write. As we talked she shared that she was struggling to cope with a history of childhood abuse, that sometimes her self-esteem was low, that as the child of a white European mother and a black father she felt estranged from other black people, particularly other black women. At that time, Tanya seemed to me to be yet another gifted black female student who might not "make it" without special attention and care. She was not the first student I "adopted," but she has stayed around longer. After graduation, with my support, she went to work at South End Press, the Left collective that at the time had published all my books. Tanya edited the book I did with Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (1991). While I had found it exciting to work with her as an editor, I encouraged her to attend graduate school. She resisted. Because she was an adopted "play" daughter, someone I related to as a parent/mentor more than as a teacher, I accepted her decision even though I felt it to be unwise. After a year spent studying in Egypt, following an end to her job as editor at South End Press, Tanya decided to attend graduate school. To me the New School was an exciting place for her because of the progressive scholars who worked there. I was especially eager to have her work with my longtime colleague and comrade Rayna Rapp. Like many of the students with whom I work as professor and/or parent, Tanya constantly monitors both the way I am working (she loves to bring critique to bear on my theory and practice) and the way in which I am represented in the larger culture.

This is a unique interview in that it begins from a location of intimacy. Tanya knows me first from her passionate engagement with my work (which was prior to meeting me) and from her intimate involvement with my life. As she becomes more fully self-actualized, her "own" woman, she is increasingly more a peer than a child/student. Like all constructive relationships, ours changes and evolves.

bell hooks
Department of English
City College, City University of New York
July 1995

* * *

Tanya McKinnon: Within feminist politics, have traditional dichotomies between theory and practice broken down any in the last twenty years?

bell hooks: When people were really concerned with the whole question of building a mass-based feminist movement there was a great deal of interest in producing a body of feminist theory that would serve as a blueprint for such a movement. Early on in feminist movement there was a strong focus on creating a theory and practice that would merge together. And in specific instances the making of feminist theory was seen as practice. The hope was that we would gather cultural momentum to transform society as a whole. It's interesting to note that the institutionalization of feminist thinking and feminist theory inside the academy began to shift this direction.

Early on, there were individuals like Charlotte Bunch who were writing feminist theory but who were not conventional academics, folks who had been academically trained but had retained a commitment to community activism outside academic institutions. Individuals who did not have Ph.D.'s were creating feminist theory that was emerging from movement-based activism. However, when women in the academy centralized the issue of academic legitimation within hierarchical patriarchal institutions, everyone began to move away from an emphasis on feminist theory that was concerned with building mass-based movement. Feminist theory became much more the site where the politics of legitimation within academic hierarchy was played out. This is the path that has brought us to where we are today, to where the kind of work (done by those feminist thinkers who see themselves as theorists) that makes no attempt to engage feminist politics is the work that is often most respected.

TM: How do you see your role in this? You are a very important feminist theorist, and you consistently merge theory and practice. How have you, as a prolific feminist theorist, contributed to the breakdown of this dichotomy between theory and practice? I see many thinkers looking to you as someone who's been instrumental in breaking down this dichotomy, and I know many young feminists who see you as someone who did not, in fact, undermine the merger of theory and practice in your work as you gained academic recognition and career celebrity.

bh: It is significant that my own development as a feminist thinker came from my personal struggles. As a young nineteen-year-old student at Stanford University, I continually strove to understand my place as a black female in this society and the concrete meaning of that identity. So to some extent, the way I really began theorizing was from my experience. Much of the work I've done subsequently, particularly in the last few years, about the practice of feminist theory emerges from precisely those

contexts where we are concretely trying to understand something we are experiencing and moves from that space of concreteness into a space of theorizing. This, I think, is the most illuminating and liberatory theory within feminism. When initiating theory from the location of experience, one can be less concerned with whether or not you will fall into the trap of separating feminist theory from concrete reality and practice. Working this way, we engage in a process of theorizing that always returns us to concrete practice. This is an organic intellectual process. And it has served as the foundation of all my work. I have found that from the time I wrote *Ain't I a Woman* [1981] to my present work, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* [1995], readers really respond to works that engage concrete issues they are grappling with in daily life. Many times readers come up to me and say, "I was sitting at home, asking myself those questions and asking myself how I would deal with them, and then I come to something you've written, and you help me understand not only how I got to where I am but how I can move further on." To me, that is a place, a location, a standpoint to begin the production of theory that does not lead us in a direction that divorces theory from practice.

TM: You, more than many theorists, have legitimized what people do in their homes as theory, that the kinds of critical assessments people make about their lives, in fact, constitute legitimate theory.

bh: One of the major problems that we begin to face around a debate of theory is that people confuse theory with ways of using language, with styles of writing. They assume that the more complicated, convoluted, metalinguistic, and abstract the writing, the more theoretically legitimate it is. Such thinking has led to the devaluation of feminist theory written in more plain language that is accessible to a broader audience.

TM: There are also differences between the theoretical and the critical. You often show, in your essays, that the critical is the genuinely theoretical. I think there are many works that present themselves as theoretical but, in fact, are not critical in relation to their subject matter, that do not subvert traditional understandings of the world around us. You've challenged that notion of theory that does not transform our understanding of the world, and, as a consequence, your work is deeply rooted in spiritual/intellectual hope and the possibility of transformation.

bh: I do believe feminist theory can be transformative—that it is absolutely necessary for feminist politics. I'm not interested in gender-based scholarship that is completely divorced from a concern with eliminating sexism and sexist oppression in the lives of women, men, and children in our world. We have so many more people today, men and women, doing scholarship that makes use of feminist thinking, that focuses on gender, that is not rooted in a commitment to feminist politics. Commitment to

feminist politics will determine the shape and direction your theorizing takes. It fundamentally determines what the end result will be.

A great deal of my work is informed by a concern with what I want that work to do in the world. If I want my work to be part of a conversion process that seeks to create a pedagogy of resistance that shares feminist thinking and feminist struggle with more people, I'm automatically committed to theorizing in a certain way. Whether you are going to write in highly technical jargon is no longer an issue, because the moment you root your feminist project in a politic that seeks to inform a particular audience, that shapes the nature of your theorizing. It is fine that there are feminist thinkers who believe their particular political vocation is to work within an academic subculture. There are people who believe they can best serve feminist movement by engaging in a kind of dialectical intellectual interchange with other people in the academy.

As a black woman writing and thinking about feminism, I was clear from the onset of my involvement with feminist movement that I first wanted to address people like myself. The moment people of color engaged in feminist thinking, decided we wanted to address people of color, we wanted to share feminist thinking in our diverse communities, that automatically meant many of us were in a counterhegemonic relationship to academe. As a consequence, we resisted being perceived as anti-academic, because we were not concerned with producing work that would primarily speak to academics or peers, one's colleagues in the field. We wanted to produce theory that worked to engage a constituency of people who may not have had access to feminist thinking, who may never have heard the word feminism. Even though we are more than twenty years into feminism, there are still masses of people in our society who do not know this word, who have no sense of what it means.

TM: How have you seen your relation to academic feminism transform since you've been in the academy? Do you feel you've been increasingly marginalized or that feminism within the academy has become more inclusive of your work?

bh: Clearly, in the last few years the academy has become more inclusive of my work. That inclusiveness has a great deal to do with the demand on the part of students for theory that engages the concrete. Many times students come up to me at lectures and tell me that they have asked their professor to teach my work, or they tell me that their professor does not like my work but the students in the class demanded that it be taught. This kind of intellectual activism energizes classrooms so that even the academic feminist who was trying to act like my work was not really weighty or theoretical enough, on occasion, may have to change her mind about it. I have a friend who is one of the few black women archivists

in the United States, and she's fond of ringing me up after she's done a computerized check on how my work is being used, so that she can show me that it is currently being used in so many disciplines within the academy. It is really astounding and amazing.

A big hope within early feminist movement was that we would transform the academy so that feminist thinking and practice would not just be present in women's studies, that there wouldn't be a ghettoization of feminist thought. We wanted, in fact, to create a body of scholarship and critical thought that would be used all over the academy. In many ways my work personifies that possibility for feminist writing because it is used in philosophy classes, composition classes, and big survey English courses; a wide diversity of college courses throughout the country use essays from my work that help generate in students the desire to think critically and to write. So my work is motivational for people in that way, and it is really, really exciting.

TM: One of the most exciting things about your work is that it, in and of itself, engenders activism. I remember many debates on my college campus about whether or not your work would be included on a given syllabus. I don't remember that many other authors and texts that were then having that kind of impact on students. There are not many texts students demand in a wide range of classes because they engender such intense political debate, across race and gender, within the classroom itself.

bh: I think that same sort of spirit that you're talking about in students is also what has enabled my work to move outside of the academy and to gain an audience that is far removed from academic institutions. Primarily, I hear about my nonacademic audience from people coming up to me at public talks and people writing to me. I have often spoken of the number of black male prisoners who write to me about my work. Or, as was the case recently, a black woman wrote me from a really poor area of New York saying that she is in hospital and that her twelve-year-old daughter brought her one of my books, *Sisters of the Yam* [1993], which she had bought on the streets of New York. Reading the book really moved her and made her feel that she could change something in her family dynamic. She was writing me to find out if there was more work of this kind.

TM: People who read your work share your work. Reading your books, unlike so many academic texts, is not a fundamentally solitary or alienating experience. People take your work, and it imbues whole parts of their lives with the possibility of transformation. This, in turn, creates in them a desire to take this work outside of themselves, to take it into their lives and relationships with them, to share both your ideas and texts. Many times, academic work is so highly privatized and the negotiation

of ideas so context specific that people do not allow it to break down boundaries in themselves or in their relationships and lives.

bh: Lately, people are more and more labeling me a public intellectual. Being an intellectual, working with ideas, is always a deeply private process and a deeply individual process. I am usually alone processing ideas, especially when writing. A public intellectual emerges not as a consequence of what the individual is doing in terms of thinking or activism but by the way in which people engage your work. There is something very noncollaborative about individual writing processes. As you know, Tanya, having known me now for almost ten years, I spend a great deal of time reading and thinking alone as well as lecturing and teaching outside. But in my mind, what allows me to have the honor of being a public intellectual is not that I have tried to project that persona through how I talk about myself, or how many community services I perform; rather, it is grounded in the use that people, in general, are able to make of my intellectual work. People are mistaken in seeing the public intellectual as personified in the body of the person. That is to say, if you are on TV talking about your work, that does not necessarily make you a public intellectual. After all, you cannot convey much about your work on a television program. What makes you a public intellectual is when your work is used in a wide range of ways by the public. That is the rewarding aspect of the kind of work I've done. Many people are invoking the term *public intellectual* as a kind of category that allows for another reproduction of hierarchy, whereby you have this sense that there are "real" intellectuals who are in the academy doing work for their colleagues, doing "rigorous" scholarship, and then there are these "public intellectuals" who are not so rigorous but who are running around talking wherever they can talk, appearing on TV shows. It is creating almost a service category, like a service porch where you place those people who are trying to link theory and practice.

TM: Do you think this is a product of the academy's hostility to individuals within the academy who are more public celebrities?

bh: It is not hostility merely to the idea of celebrity. There are people who are labeled public intellectuals who don't have celebrity status. Fundamentally, it is a hostility to the union of theory and practice. We can't possibly talk about the future of feminist theory in relation to practice without talking about the fact that the academy as we know it remains fundamentally hostile to an intellectual process that does in fact seek to have moral and ethical implications for how people live and for their habits of being. To that extent, any academic and/or intellectual—and here it is important to emphasize that not all academics are intellectuals, and not all intellectuals are academics—who chooses to engage a world outside the academy will be regarded with suspicion. Within the academy,

the hostility to the intellectual who is not trying to hide away in some private space but is trying to produce work that does speak to a large audience does commit her or him to the kind of writing that would speak to a larger audience of people. People are afraid that if they move their work in that direction, that will automatically be seen as "less than" in an academic environment.

TM: As someone who has been close to you over the last ten years and as someone who has seen your celebrity increase inside and outside the academy, I'm curious as to how you negotiate your private self and your public persona. How do you decide on what parts of your private life are to be incorporated in your public persona?

bh: I am deeply committed to a critique of domination that believes there has to be a rupture of the separation between public and private. I never fear that I am losing a private space if I draw on personal experience to create theory, or if I make myself available to audiences, to students, to individuals who want to discuss and engage me around the questions of feminist thinking and feminist theory, because I don't conceptualize privacy in such a shallow way. There has been a regression within feminist thinking where we don't discuss the politics of public and private as much as we once did. We don't talk about what it means to remain committed to a concern with transgression. As the habits of bourgeois feminists have become more enshrined, feminist thinkers and activists are now more unwilling to discuss issues considered private. Once you have a successful co-optation of feminist thinking within bourgeois frameworks, then you can also have that corresponding sense that it is acceptable to retreat from radicalism, from a critique of domination that is conceived with the issue of class—that seeks to continually interrogate the boundaries between public and private. Now one gains status by declaring allegiance to very conventional notions of privacy. To call for the disruption of public and private is not to diminish the importance of privacy in human life. It simply means that we must rethink what privacy is and what it means. What the private means as part of the psychology of domination, particularly patriarchal domination, is very different from a notion of privacy in relation to individual needs, desires, and longings. How would we talk about privacy, within a liberatory nonsexist society? The ways in which privacy is constructed and the meaning of public and private legitimize and uphold structures of domination, particularly sexism.

TM: Do you think that the media, over the last twenty years, have undermined how people feel they can share the "personal," that private issues have been elevated to spectacle, and that the possibility of one's private struggles becoming spectacle has made people back away from wanting to merge the private with the public meaningfully?

bh: Absolutely, but that becomes a cheap opting out of what should

be rigorous practice. It is not an easy cultural move in our society to try and utilize the private in the space of the public. There is a distinction that has to be made between utilizing the "private" and "confession." All too often, people simply move the private into the public via a means of confession. What we have had, certainly in the last ten years, is mass media shining a spotlight on personal confession. Using the private to transgress the public, to disrupt and subvert, does not take place solely by the practice of confession. This is why people critique confession. Private life as exhibitionism and performance is not the same thing as a politicized strategic use of private information that seeks to subvert the politics of domination.

TM: People have attempted to trivialize your use of the private in your work by saying things like, "If you talk to bell hooks, you'll end up in one of her talks or you'll end up in one of her essays." How do you address people's reservations about the fact that you do incorporate your personal relationships into your work?

bh: I use anecdotal stories and draw on experiences from my life, because I believe it is very difficult to imagine concretely how we will actualize feminist thinking and practice without examples. [In] my first two books, *Ain't I a Woman* [1981] and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* [1984], you see very few anecdotal stories that have to do with my private experiences. I began to draw on concrete experience as readers and listeners said to me, "We just don't understand how to actualize feminist thought in some concrete way in our everyday life." If we want individuals of either gender to understand the ways in which they can be empowered by feminist thinking and politics in everyday life, we have to be willing to overcome a certain protectionism around private experience, to be willing to share concretely what we do and how we do it. What are our habits of being, and what is the impact of feminist thinking on behavior? It is transformative in a positive way, but how do we share the nature of that transformation if we cannot speak the "private"?

Frequently, people assume it is easy for me to share the private or that I somehow want to do this. My use of the private emerges out of political commitment that may at times demand the sacrifice of privacy. There is a tendency for knowledge that is transformative to remain accessible to the elect, the chosen. I think there are many feminist thinkers who use feminist knowledge in ways that improve their individual lives concretely but who don't theorize these experiences because this knowledge begins to be seen in very capitalist terms as a resource that must be hoarded. Keeping the knowledge for one's own use becomes a way to exercise power. Sharing the personal is also about sharing power. We have to envision the collective good that emerges when we do not hoard feminist thinking that is transformative.

Academe is, essentially, a competitive corporate structure. Many of us academics now operate competitively within feminist circles. In an atmosphere of competition, people become more guarded, more defensive, and, frankly, more paranoid. When you begin to draw on personal experience you become vulnerable. The questions, critiques, and interrogations that may be made of you and your work may not be directed at those individuals who never speak about their personal lives. To be always scrutinized is difficult. To live openly, honestly, in such a way that there is nothing that cannot see the light of day, that's difficult. It requires constant vigilance. This is not a path everyone can walk. This vigilance tends not to reproduce the theorist who inhabits a hierarchical position above reproach. In this case, the mind is not separate from the body, allowing you to receive feedback. Folks feel the need to interrogate, to question, and to challenge you. This is a great burden and a responsibility. If you simply erase the personal from theoretical writing, you don't have to meet the challenge.

TM: This is what brought me into your life ten years ago and what makes your students love you. You are one of those rare teachers whose pedagogical practice really impacts and transforms your students. So many of your former students have very, very deep feelings about the personal and intellectual experience that they had inside and outside of the classroom with you, that you make yourself personally accessible to students to begin with. When I first met you, one of the things that was so important for me as a young feminist was that I was able to question you, that there wasn't, in fact, a rigid wall of artificially constructed student/professor identity between us.

bh: What allowed you to question me? What was it about the way I conducted myself, which is a practice, a pedagogy, that allowed you to talk back?

TM: In part, it was the fact that you "signify," and in black culture this creates the possibility of critical engagement and dialogue.

bh: Signifying is always about a dialogue; it is about mutual recognition.

TM: When I first met you, you were shockingly open with me about myself. This is a style we don't find very often in academic theorists. I remember one of the first things you said to me was, "Why do you have all that relaxed hair?" You were willing to engage me, how I looked, my body, and the things I said, and that, in turn, gave me the confidence and intellectual intimacy to question you. "What does this mean about your life, your body, your voice?" This openness and reciprocity enabled me to trust you and share fully with you in a very short period of time.

Another very important aspect of your practice is that you engage people on their level. When my hair was relaxed, you questioned me

around this and challenged me on the level of my politics and beliefs, so that my political transformation was not a mimicry of your politics but the natural progression of my own thinking.

bh: As you were talking, I was reminded of how important it is that we begin with people where they are. Often, where people are, most immediately, is in the space of their own lives, their own bodies, their own longings and dreams. So much intellectual thought in our culture does not try to engage people where they are; instead, it tries to aggressively push people to move from where they are to some other place. This is not an effective means of educating for critical consciousness.

I do see it as a part of my activism as a feminist thinker to promote and encourage folks, particularly women of color and black women specifically, to engage feminist thinking. When I focus on young black women students like yourself and nurture your intellectual growth, it's because I don't want there to be only one bell hooks or one Audre Lorde. I want there to be many, many black women writing feminist theory. From the moment I made my commitment to feminist theory I was passionately working to create a space where other black women could feel like they belong in this process of feminist thinking and theory making. When you, as an undergraduate, asked questions at my talk and seemed to be really engaged and bright, I was eager to talk with you to draw you out, to bring you into the center.

TM: What kind of feminist consciousness do students coming to you today have, twenty years into feminist practice and scholarship? Are young women in your classes today much more aware of feminism and feminist theory than students ten years ago?

bh: Well, look at you, Tanya. When I met you at twenty you were just an emerging baby girl feminist. As I became a major figure in your life, as both an intellectual mentor and a surrogate mother figure, you developed in various stages. When I met you, you were incredibly open to feminist thinking, and like many black females, you went through a period, after college, of disillusionment with feminist thinking and theorizing. Now that you are in graduate school, you are returning to an embrace of feminist theory that has come because of your understanding of what it means for women of color, in the academy, to choose theory making as a site of their academic work.

What I see in you, and lots of other young women of all races, is continual growth and development. People often start off very enthusiastic about feminist thinking, but as they encounter various modes of thought that challenge or engender despair about patriarchy changing, there is often a movement away. There is often disillusionment. I do much more work now to bring young women back to feminist thinking. The whole privileging of metalinguistic writing as theory over other forms of writing

was very alienating to many young women and men who were coming to feminist classrooms and professors in the hope of understanding how they could, in fact, engage a feminist politic that would be transformative in their lives and the lives of other people. There has been a tremendous disillusionment about feminist pedagogy in our culture. This is ironic because there have been so many mass media articles trying to suggest that the feminist classroom trivializes knowledge by its overwhelming focus on the experiential. But my own sense of the development of feminist theory within academic settings is totally different. In most feminist classrooms that I see, and I certainly go around to at least thirty or forty institutions a year in the United States, the prevailing complaint is not how all these classes are focusing on the experiential but that there still exists a tremendous gap between theory and experience, and there is much of a demand that students engage very highly pedantic theoretical writing that does not necessarily address anything that has to do with daily life on various levels. Today, this is more the norm than an experientially based women's studies, which was more a norm fifteen years ago. This is precisely why issues of theory and practice are once again on the agenda. We have seen an incredible surge of interest in feminist thought. More men than ever before are participating as students and professors in feminist classrooms, yet it hasn't necessarily led to a creation of a wide body and a diverse body of feminist scholarship that meaningfully unites a notion of theory and practice.

TM: How do you think cultural criticism and feminism are merged in addressing these issues? Are young women being influenced more by texts labeled cultural criticism than by more traditional feminist texts?

bh: The cultural criticism I do links an understanding of the politics of race, gender, and class to critical thinking about popular culture. The worlds of cinema, TV, and magazines do constitute something real in people's everyday lives. Mass media representations also shape self and identity for many young people. Most recently, I've written about the politics of race and gender in *Pulp Fiction.* It cannot be overlooked that this movie has a widespread appeal, across class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. It is very important to engage it critically, to use it as a tool by which one may illuminate feminist ideas, because it has the possibility of engaging students as well as people who are not students more effectively than if one were working with a more abstract idea and trying to get people to engage that. I find that I've turned to cultural criticism so much more, as I say in *Outlaw Culture* [1994], precisely because students start out being antitheory. If I present a concrete analysis of a film, it opens them up. As they begin to interrogate what happens in the film, they rely on a theoretical assumption and are more willing to engage theory. I find

this exciting; it has to do with the dynamic interplay between cultural criticism and feminist thinking.

TM: Going back, for a second, to the notion of being a public intellectual, I see you functioning as the "enlightened" witness in the lives of your readership and the lives of your students. And I think this is in part due to your role as a feminist cultural critic. You're willing to name things about our reality, and we, particularly women of color, may not have anyone in our lives who affirms our experience of reality.

bh: Absolutely. You take the term *enlightened witness* from Alice Miller. Many people feel my work is less "intellectual" precisely because I've tried to link that work to issues of self-actualization, of spiritual and emotional growth, to how we establish self and identity in ways that embrace a vision of mental health. This is bothersome to people who feel this is not the work of intellectuals. I'm really interested, more and more, in how we can link theorizing to a concern with healing. I would much rather people be able to grow emotionally, be more able to cope with pain by reading feminist theory than by taking Prozac.

Remember what I was telling you last week? We were sitting together on a Friday night, and first I got a phone call from one of my black women students from Yale, whom I taught years ago, with whom I remain bonded, and then I got a call from one of my former white female teaching assistants who is now working in publishing and writing a dissertation. They both had issues they needed to discuss. My former assistant talked about her concerns that many of the really gifted young feminist thinkers she knows are deeply depressed and/or taking Prozac and other kinds of drugs in ways that she feels are harmful to them.

You and I were talking about why these young women are not able to engage a process of intellectualization and theorizing that could be empowering to them and should be part of what makes them healthy in the world, more able to live in the world, able to confront reality in ways that don't diminish but inspire. That is a holistic concept of intellectual practice that people often make fun of but that I have found to be incredibly liberatory in my life. I only really began to talk about this as I was faced with so many students who were in despair, suicidal, and at times actually committing suicide. There hasn't been a great deal of space within discussions of academe to talk about death, the fact that so many of our students do feel suicidal, feel as though they are cut off. My own speaking more about these subjects was a concrete response to a particular kind of anguish I saw in my students, in my colleagues, and in myself. Once again, what generated a shift in my intellectual thought was not desire for a new topic or something that would get me attention but really concretely searching for new ways to think.

TM: How does it make you feel to know that you can [have] such an immediate and qualitative impact on your readership, on your students, and then to see elements of your work appropriated by more traditional academic, feminist theorists who often do not credit your work?

bh: I think it is better to be ignored than to have your work misappropriated. I actually don't feel as though I haven't gotten deserved acclaim. I feel that my work has been very acclaimed. In my own oppositional practice, I seek acclaim in unconventional ways. It has been exciting for me to see my work affirmed in spaces that are important to me; in particular, the responses from students and readers outside the academy are important sites of validation. It is even more exciting that this success has not come at the price of my not making it in the academy. I have a conventional success in academe.

Many women and men have built upon the work of critical thinkers like myself. I am not the only feminist thinker who works to unite theory and practice, because I'm in incredibly good company with a whole number of other thinkers whose work challenges and excites—certainly, Audre Lorde. I could go on and on naming people whose work I feel has similar possibilities even if it hasn't had the same type of impact. What I do find very, very saddening is the number of feminist thinkers, particularly white feminist thinkers, who continue to be the majority group within academe, who draw on the work of people of color in a way that is blatantly disrespectful; that is to say, they utilize that work to inform their own scholarship in such a way as to make it seem like they are the "real" theorists. At times it seems as though we are the pickers of the cotton and they are the people who take the cotton and weave it into tapestry. That has to do again with competition within hierarchies of academic prestige and power.

Early on, in feminist movement, women thought deeply about internalized sexism in their relations with one another. Today, however, this has gone out of style. There is a sense that somehow you can sit at home and say that you are a feminist and produce work without interrogating your allegiance to sexism or patriarchy. When I converted to feminist politics and made a commitment to feminism, the first site of transformation had to be the transformation of my own ways of thinking and seeing other women. Unfortunately, we now see many academic women lay claim to feminism across age, race, ethnicity who do not disengage from patriarchal thought or habits of being. Conservatism within higher education encourages everyone to believe that our ideas should be original to have value; therefore, if you have drawn on the work of other people, it is important to subordinate their work to yours. This is very evident in much recent feminist work. When I think about the future of feminism, I hope that we will once again recommit ourselves to a feminist politics

that seeks to engage the masses, that seeks to transform the culture. I hope there will be a new revolutionary feminist movement that functions as a collective, organized, mass-based site of struggle. There is feminist activism that is successful, powerful, that gives us tremendous rewards and results at specific sites of resistance. But when we think about a movement in terms of widespread collective organizing that is impacting the public beyond the academy, there is not much that says feminist movement is alive and well. The fact is, contemporary feminist movement has been successful. It has led to the formation of various locations where individual women and men are able to live lives fully empowered by feminist thinking and feminist politics. The challenge of where we go from here is to be able to create a new feminist movement that would be the site for the production of revolutionary feminist theory that is inclusive, that changes how people think and act. Courageous and daring, this theory necessarily evokes practice on multiple levels. It will need to be constantly rewritten because our lives are constantly changing. There is no static blueprint—feminist thinkers must remain at the drawing board if feminist theory is to retain a meaningful critical edge.

Tanya McKinnon
Department of Anthropology
New School for Social Research

References

hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism.* Boston: South End.
———. 1983. "Toni Morrison's Fiction: Keeping 'A Hold on Life.'" Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz.
———. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.* Boston: South End.
———. 1993. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery.* Boston: South End.
———. 1994. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations.* New York: Routledge.
———. 1995. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism.* New York: Holt.
hooks, bell, and Cornel West. 1991. *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life.* Boston: South End.
Leatherman, Courtney. 1995. "A Name for Herself: When Black Feminism Needed a Voice, bell hooks Was Born." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* May 19, A22, A24.
Morrison, Toni. 1970. *The Bluest Eye.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
———. 1973. *Sula.* New York: Knopf.