

# Cultural critic hooks calls for values revolution

by Trevor Burnett

**Excalibur: There seems to be a misunderstanding of the word "feminist." In your opinion what does the word really mean?**

bell hooks: I don't think that feminism is just about women, or respect for women. Feminism is a political movement to end sexism and sexist oppression. In that sense it's not just for women or about women. It's about all of us. That means women who are sexist have to unlearn their sexism and men who are sexist have to unlearn theirs.

I think people misunderstand feminism when they don't see it as a political movement but see it as a lifestyle thing, or see it as women against men. That's not what feminism is about.

**There are different types of feminism — radical, Marxist, conservative, and so on. Which ones would you agree with or disagree with?**

I'm not supportive of breaking feminism down into all these categories because they seem to be a way of trying to accommodate people who are more reformist.

Your strategies may be reformist. Some strategies may be more radical.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about why it is people won't take a fundamental stand against patriarchy. And you can't take a fundamental stand against patriarchy as long as you're trying to come up with ways to keep one foot in and one foot out.

I think we have to keep in mind what our central political agenda is. If it's to end sexism and sexist oppression then it's a radical agenda — a subversive agenda.

I think it's very telling that when Black women and women of colour in general critique the racism within the feminist movement we're suddenly told "but how can you say 'feminist movement.' There are all these different kinds."

But many of us didn't hear about all those different kinds until we started saying there are some fundamental problems with how you conceptualize the feminist movement and feminist thinking.

**Where can Black feminism and white feminism meet and what are the differences?**

For me there's no difference between Black feminism and white feminism. There are progressive Black women who advocate specific notions of feminism that have to do with Black experience.

I meet with anybody including white women who are struggling to end sexism and sexist oppression. Now, the nature of that struggle, given the nature of our race and class, might be different.

**What's your analysis of the cause of inequality in North America? Is it more race, class, or gender-based?**

It's very clear to all of us that there are interlocking systems of domination that are race, class, and gender-bound...[and] in fact they come together as a whole, as a tripartite system of domination and we might add imperialism to that.

If we look at something like the Gulf War, we can see on all levels how race, gender, class and imperialist values determine U.S. policy in the Gulf.

But you couldn't take just one factor and from that isolate it and say it was really about imperialism, because it was also about racism. It's about the continued anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. All of those kinds of things that have been cultivated in the last several years and the whole sort of construction of Iraq as evil and the U.S. as godly and Christian.

**So it's not more race based or gender based?**

I'm saying that there are different circumstances. If we look at the recent riots in L.A. those were class-based protests because you didn't have rich Black folks in L.A. out burning anything. So obviously those protest were not just a function of racial rage. They were a function of racial rage and class rage.

One of our problems is that we don't talk about class that much in Black life. So you can have newscasters come out and say "Black people are rioting!" But in fact it was a specific class of Black people.

There are a lot of rich Black people in LA and they will not burn anything and it didn't mean that they didn't have rage about the Rodney King verdict. It meant that they probably have other vehicles for the expression of their rage. They don't have to be burning down stores, or stealing diapers and toilet paper, because they can buy their diapers and toilet paper.

**Some whites accuse Blacks who speak out against racism in a militant way of being racist themselves. Is that possible? Can Blacks be racist?**



**bell hooks speaks at York**

photo by Rose-ann Bailey

**Consumerism and so-called "family values" keep a bad system going, hooks told a York audience this month. She also spoke to excalibur reporter Trevor Burnett.**

by Trevor Burnett

People must learn to think in a new way and reject North American consumer culture, U.S. feminist bell hooks told York students two weeks ago.

Speaking to an overflow audience, hooks, professor of Women's Studies and English at Oberlin College, Ohio recounted her childhood experiences attending school in the American south at the time of the civil rights movement.

"Back then the struggle was against racism. Today it also includes sexism, imperialism and classism," hooks said.

Many speak passionately about freedom for all but their actions in public and private life help to maintain the culture of domination, hooks said.

Her main theme was that a revolution of values was necessary in order to have a transformed society.

hooks also attacked the hypocrisy of "family values" championed in the mass media, calling them a way for America's ruling class to maintain domination.

hooks cited the many instances of women being beaten, raped or murdered

in households where traditional family values were being upheld, and said that Blacks were being convinced that racism can be pardoned by establishing a strong Black male patriarchy.

hooks also scorned the strong consumer mentality in North American society.

"If those of us who are committed to a culture of freedom aren't willing to relinquish our engagement with the perverse values of competitive consumer capitalism, we cannot represent by the examples of our lives that it is possible to break [apart from] domination," she said.

hooks was also critical of previously destitute people who had attained wealth and then took on the values of the ruling class.

hooks cited some Blacks as the biggest offenders.

"Some of us act as if we can excuse our materialism by suggesting that our willingness to act in complicity with competitive consumer values is about reparations for the past."

As an example, hooks noted African American author Alice Walker.

In a recent magazine interview Walker criticized

the obsession with materialism in the United States, and was asked if her privileged lifestyle contradicted this.

Walker said she deserved her wealth because of hard work, and justified it by pointing to numerous humanitarian causes she has supported.

Third year student Dwayne Evans didn't see hooks' statement as an attack on Walker, but agreed that "[there is] the danger of thinking that by giving to charities and worthy causes it's okay to be materialistic."

Carol Higgins, a second year student also agreed. "I think she was speaking the truth," she said.

hooks conceded that Black capitalism and Black self-determination are not similar and should not be confused.

She concluded love for ourselves and others was the only way for us to have a genuine revolution of values.

Reaction to hooks' lecture was positive.

"The woman inspires me every time I hear her," said Morningstar Trickey.

"I like her. She seems far removed from the ivory towers [of academia]," said Mark Proudfoot.

racism, sexism and classism what would it be?

I don't think we have any living example of any economic system solely that gets at those things.

I'm interested in a democratic socialist anti-materialist construction of society. But I don't see any examples of that or a vision of how one would dismantle all those other forms of domination. They wouldn't be dismantled by economics alone.

**If you could choose an economic system that would end**

I think people who say that have no understanding of the institutionalized nature of racism. Those kind of people usually think that prejudice is racism.

Racism isn't prejudice solely. Racism is about domination.

If white people just thought we were ugly and stinky and left us alone, we'd be happy.

The fact is, it's the institutionalized forms of power. So I don't think that Black people can be racist in that sense. Black people can have preju-

## "Racist" Painting Vandalized

TORONTO — A painting in a current Hart House exhibit at U of T. had to be removed last week after staff members vandalized the painting, saying it was racist.

"Love Your Enemy" by Steven Fakiyasi was relocated to another office after some staff members ripped the painting's canvas and attempted to remove it from the wall.

According to Fakiyasi, who describes himself as "a black artist of African nationality," the work depicts "two black males holding their brother at gunpoint." The words "Back to Africa ya Nigger" are spray painted near the top of the canvas.

Several staff members said the work was racist, citing the spray painted phrase.

The outcry prompted the organization of a panel discussion on Friday Oct. 16, whereby several of African or Caribbean heritage attended and commented about the painting.

The decision regarding the location of the painting would be made at an Exhibitions Subcommittee meeting.

## Pro-choice activists ready to fight.

OTTAWA — Pro-choice activists in Ottawa are gearing up for a fight to get the city its own abortion clinic.

Dr. Henry Morgentaler applied to the Ottawa District Health Council to open a clinic in August 1991. The application is still under review.

Pro-choice activists say they think the health council and provincial government are stalling the decision.

The proposed clinic would be supported by the province's health plan and be used as a training facility.

A local clinic would assure quicker access for women to abortion. The clinic would also provide a more sympathetic environment for women, where the moral convictions of doctors would not interfere with the quality of care they would receive.

The Pro-Choice Network held a march Oct. 17 to raise money for Morgentaler's legal defence cases before the Supreme Court.

## Students protest car use

VICTORIA — With bicycles and backpacks on the nearby grass, four Environmental Studies students at the University of Victoria displayed their anti-pollution sentiments at an entrance to the university.

Wearing gas masks, and holding signs encouraging people to leave their cars at home and take the bus, car pool, ride a bike, or walk, they met the Oct. 1 morning rush hour.

"The reason we were there was to remind people of the alternatives to driving," said one of the participants.

I thought it went well, he added. "We got a lot of response, especially from cyclists who gave us the thumbs up."

The environmentalists were only trying to raise awareness at this time.

"We were wearing the masks because on the way to school you would notice the smell from cars."

"If we have traffic jams every morning, it has very severe implications for the atmosphere and the air quality."

Compiled by Elaine Bellio  
with files from Canadian University Press

