

response to previously unheard voices (some young, some not) challenging orthodoxies with new experiences and different priorities. After all, as Rowbotham herself says, 'movements do move'; and so they should.

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References

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Talking Back: Thinking Feminist – Thinking Black bell hooks

Sheba: London, 1989, £5.95 Pbk
ISBN 0 9071 79401

Increasingly there is discussion and articles are written about post-feminism. One could be forgiven (almost) for thinking that the feminist movement was nothing but a flash-in-the-pan-flavour-of-the-month episode in the world view of things.

There are certainly many amongst those of us who call ourselves Black feminists, myself included, who have, at times, in the latter half of the eighties, felt powerless to effect the kinds of change we thought would flow from our heightened consciousness and active politicization which occurred as a result of feminism, and the Black feminist movement in particular, during the seventies and early eighties.

Still, we continue to give our heart and soul to that movement, and more importantly, try to forge the realities of our lives within it. Nevertheless, we are alarmed by the creeping reaction that the post-feminists describe – the idea (which doggedly persists) that feminists are one-dimensional, lesbian man-haters; that little has changed despite years of vocalizing and resistance.

For Black women, the argument goes that we have allowed ourselves the self-indulgence of playing the

white woman's game for too long, that it's not paid off in terms of generalized acceptance among Black people, especially younger Black women (though I think the positive influence of Black feminists on younger Black women will become increasingly quantifiable), and it's now time to get back to the basics of fighting racism as our primary motivating force.

These criticisms are especially hard to take given the reality of the divide which we all know still exists between Black and white feminists; between those with a radical versus a nonradical perspective (as viewed in the British context); between Black women who describe themselves as feminists and those who don't; and even, dare I say it, between Black feminists, as we struggle to make our personal our political.

Bell hooks serves up a number of home truths in this latest book which speak to some of those concerns in an honest and not too convoluted a manner.

I was surprised by it. On the one hand, it is a political treatise of the Black feminist movement as it grapples with the contradictions of class, gender and sexual relations; on the other, it is a deeply intimate account of personal and political maturation within that framework.

There has long been a school of thought among some Black feminists in Britain that the tendency to prioritize the outwardly political over the inwardly personal results in a distorted whole. This view holds that

we cannot deny or suppress that part of us which contributes to our definition of self as Black women because it's 'too personal', and gets in the way of broader political issues.

In *Talking Back* bell hooks helps to legitimize that view as a concept to be acted upon. In doing so, however, she crucially speaks to the idea that emphasis on the personal or identity alone is not enough, in and of itself, to denote political consciousness.

In her discussion on identity politics as it relates to 'separatist, individualistic and inward-looking notions', she rightly points out that 'simply describing one's experience of exploitation or oppression is not to become politicized'.

What feminist politicization instead requires is linking efforts to socially construct self and identity in an oppositional framework that resists domination.

The point about the intimacy of the book, however, what bell hooks calls 'going deep', is that it demonstrates an understanding and acceptance of the need to 'be open about personal stuff', which she says has only recently worked its way fully into her writing.

For that I am grateful, because it opens up a new realm for open consideration by Black feminists. The essay, 'Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education' is an outcome of this process. In it, she discusses her need and conscious efforts to maintain connections with family and community across class boundaries, as a Black woman, a product of academia, from a working-class, Southern background who has 'crossed over'. (More than a few of us have grappled with that one.)

Equally, the essay on violence, in which she talks of personally coming to terms with being hit by someone she loved made me think about violence against women in a different way. In particular, there is merit in her call for a widened feminist discussion on violence against women to include a recognition of the

ways in which women use abusive force against children. This could, she feels, aid our understanding of why children who were hit growing up are often hit as adults or hit others.

It is hard to argue, too, with her critique of Spike Lee's film, *She's Gotta Have It*. She makes the point that despite its efforts to portray a radical new image of Black female sexuality, and the positive portrayal of the 'power struggles, contradictions, the craziness of the black male-female relationships', it is, she notes, 'ultimately a patriarchal tale . . . in which woman does not emerge triumphant, fulfilled'.

There is so much here – education, as the 'practice of freedom', providing the tools to question and deal critically with the politics of domination; the discussion on homophobia in Black communities – in which she makes the point that homophobic attitudes can be altered or changed in environments (like Black communities) where they have not become rigidly institutionalized; and that it is important for feminists to look at the nature of homophobia and challenge it in constructive ways; and finally, on the need for feminist theorists to liberate as opposed to mystify through their use of language.

That is why it was disappointing at the end of this book, to see bell hooks declare that she does not call herself a Black feminist. Rather, she prefers that women think less in terms of feminism as an identity and more in terms of 'advocating feminism'. That we 'move from emphasis on personal lifestyle issues toward creating political paradigms and radical social models of social change that emphasise collective as well as individual change'.

The determined struggle of Black feminists in Britain to organize autonomously was, in my opinion, exactly the kind of radical social model which she describes. The naming process which we undertook

to call ourselves Black feminists was in itself a collective affirmation of the need to construct a feminism that spoke to gender, class and race, growing out of our experiences and because of our connections to our Black communities and cultures.

Bell hooks makes the point that the feminist movement in the States was one which automatically excluded a great many people. And she points to its symbolic gestures at the beginning of the movement – bra-burning, protesting the Miss America Pageant – as examples of its flawed class analysis.

But she asks the question: 'What if our symbolic gestures were women at a factory protesting against working conditions? This would have a far more radical impact on our consciousness than the image of people burning a bra.'

I couldn't agree more. That is

why Black feminists in Britain identified with and supported the women workers during the Grunwick strike of 1977; why we fought against sin bins and disruptive units for Black children and why we successfully fought to end virginity tests for Asian women at British ports of entry.

We are in our communities and of our communities; and just as those communities must come to terms with their hostility towards Black women and men who are lesbian or gay, so must it accept its sisters who are feminist, who are saying, you must realize the sexism which exists and work to eradicate it, as you work to eradicate racism and class division.

The value we place on naming ourselves demands nothing less.

Melba Wilson

Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence

Julia Swindells

Polity: Oxford 1986

£7.95 Pbk, 0 7456 0072 7

£25.00 Hbk, 0 7456 0071 9

Julia Swindells book at once debunks the myth of feminism as humourless and academic writing as forbiddingly 'difficult'. Even the cover functions as a visual pun; the middle-class woman who reads face to face with the working-class woman who is read about, bringing the two together, equally stylized in the male representation. This points to one of the book's central arguments, the relation of 'literariness' to the moral in the construction of subjectivities. Although Swindells is reluctant to define 'the literary', it connotes in general terms those symbolization processes which, in the nineteenth century, get enshrined in the novel as the genre most widely

read and canonized in the production business of high culture. Thus in Swindells account of the correspondence between Mary Smith and Jane Carlyle, two women whose different position in relation to the 'literary' and to class is similarly marked, there is involved (for all the women concerned) a process of negotiating predetermined categories of 'appropriate' writing.

It is no accident that I begin with an illustration from the second half of the book, where the shift occurs from canonical fiction to the writings of working women autobiographers. It is part of the logic of the book that its preliminary arguments about the class relations of writing should begin to tell at this later stage. In Dickens' *Little Dorrit* one version of a Victorian maidservant is represented, but the relation between domestic service and writing is far more acutely and painfully realized in the account of a working woman autobiographer such as Elizabeth Ham. In George Eliot's *Adam Bede*