

“To Enact a Postmodernism of Resistance”: The Transgressive Thought of bell hooks and the Interdisciplinarity of White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy

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Abstract

Through enacting what she refers to as “a postmodernism of resistance,” bell hooks works out and works through a methodology of transgressive thought, through a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology. When mouthed, this radical rhetoric is significantly inaugurated in part by the well-known text, *Ain't I A Woman*, but is also launched in particular ways by hooks's lesser-known 1983 dissertation on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. What becomes integral to hook's transgressive thought is a critique of how black womanhood attends to keeping a hold on life, transgressively confronting the interdisciplinarity of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

Keywords: patriarchy; capitalist; white-supremacist; resistance; feminist ideology.

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Beginning in *Ain't I A Woman* (1981), bell hooks identifies resistance in conjunction with revolution, rather than reform, as that which is fundamental to both making feminist ideology more meaningful than just “mouth[ing] radical rhetoric” and ensuring that this radical rhetoric does not “establish itself within the capitalist patriarchal system.”¹ In this sense, *Ain't I A Woman* is a seminal text, not only informed by the relationship between feminist ideology and radical rhetoric of Sojourner Truth and Ann Julia Cooper, for instance, but also informs the same relationship for the likes of Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. At the heart of the text is an argument for the uniqueness of Black womanhood, as that which is shaped historically by slavery and capitalism, shaped culturally by patriarchy and sexism, and shaped socially by race and racism. In each of these contexts, *Ain't I A Woman* develops an understanding of feminist ideology for Black womanhood, which, on one hand, carries forward the feminist concerns of Truth and Cooper, but also becomes, on the other hand, indispensable to the feminisms of Davis, Morrison and Walker.

For hooks, while the term “feminist ideology” refers to a specific frame of mind about Black womanhood, the other term, “radical rhetoric” refers to a specific way of mouthing Black womanhood. It is with this radical rhetoric of feminist ideology that Black womanhood can confront capitalist patriarchy, not as a means of reforming the capitalist patriarchal system, but as a way of initiating a revolution against it, which, of course, is just as much evidenced by Truth and Cooper as it is by Davis, Morrison and Walker. In hooks' view, reforming the capitalist patriarchal system becomes “in no way a challenge or a threat to capitalist patriarchy.”² If resistance as reform “has done little to eliminate sexist oppression,”³ then resistance as revolution is more intentional in how it challenges or threatens capitalist patriarchy and eliminates sexist oppression, through seeking more meaningful change as liberation. For hooks, when radical rhetoric attends to resistance as reform, it only offers abstract, immaterial liberation, since radical rhetoric that attends more intentionally to resistance as revolution espouses concrete, material liberation, grounded on the fact that “change occurs only when there is action, movement, revolution.”⁴

The radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, for hooks, must be deployed and mouthed against capitalist patriarchy to elicit change, but it must also be deployed and mouthed against the failures that hooks sees in the women's movement of the 1970s, in the years leading up to her writing of *Ain't I A Woman*. Insofar as hooks acknowledges that this “contemporary feminist movement was initially motivated by the desire of women to eliminate sexist oppression,”⁵ what ultimately undercuts the effectiveness of this movement and relegates it to merely an abstract, immaterial means of liberation is that “it takes place within the framework of a larger, more powerful cultural system that encourages women and men to place the fulfilment of individual aspirations above their desire for collective change.”⁶ Therein lies the problem: “the contemporary feminist movement,” as hooks envisions it, is questioning and critiquing “a larger, more powerful cultural system” of capitalist patriarchy, while it is always-already operating “within the framework” of that very system—to this end, hooks' conceptualization of the contemporary feminist movement is intent on reforming capitalist patriarchy rather than revolting against it altogether.

For hooks, feminist ideology, at the very core of her *Ain't I A Woman*, calls for an objectifying of the capitalist patriarchal system and a distancing of feminism from it, instead of allowing feminist ideology to remain ensconced in the ideology of capitalist patriarchy and be subjectivized by capitalist patriarchal hegemony. What makes feminist ideology work is the radical rhetoric it deploys against ideological, hegemonic marginalization and the sense that feminist ideology grounds radical rhetoric to that which establishes itself outside the capitalist patriarchal system. The radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, for hooks, should speak to and should speak out against a particular kind of cultural hegemony imposed by capitalist patriarchy, particularly when viewing “cultural hegemony” in terms of

1. bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 191.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid, 193.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

how it is theorized by Antonio Gramsci. To be sure, hooks never mentions Gramsci anywhere in *Ain't I A Woman*, nor does she ever concretely evoke the term Marxism, even if her articulations of “class”⁷ and “capitalism,”⁸ for instance, have unmistakable characteristics of a Gramscian Marxism,⁹ though in the cultural hegemonic mode of Black womanhood. Along these lines, hooks’ revision of Gramscian Marxism views cultural hegemony as an intersectional issue for Black womanhood, which, as it will be conceptualized moving forward, through the interdisciplinary concerns of white-supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. Each of these separate disciplines becomes an interdisciplinary interlocutor in the combination of problems that Black womanhood confronts in how hooks envisions cultural hegemony as the intersectional combinations of race, racism, slavery and sexism – this is methodologically set in motion by *Ain't I A Woman* and its advocacy for the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology.

As much as she is concerned with understanding what Black womanhood is from the bottom-up standpoint of the intersectionality of race, racism, slavery and sexism, hooks is also concerned with understanding how Black womanhood is what it is from the top-down perspective of the interdisciplinarity of white-supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. Here, “intersectionality,” as hooks attends to it, can be contextualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s use of the term within the field of legal studies towards “consider[ing] intersectional identities such as women of color”¹⁰ and “the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience.”¹¹ For that matter, the term is relationally utilized by Patricia Hill Collins towards Black feminist thought, rooted in a “comprehensive Black feminist analyses” of sexual politics that fundamentally incorporates a mans of working through the interlocking nature of race, gender and class oppression.¹² For hooks, intersectionality provides for “an analytical framework” which situates Black womanhood, as a term, within the intersection of race, racism, slavery and sexism “in the process of reaching maximal salience.”¹³ This maximal salience, then, speaks to a broader “interdisciplinarity,” to a certain end for hooks, drawn from Julie Thompson Klein and Joe Moran. Respectively speaking, while Klein is concerned with how “boundary crossing stimulates the formation of trading zones of interaction, interlanguages, hybrid communities and professional roles, new institutional structures, and new categories of knowledge,”¹⁴ and Moran has similar concerns, particularly with how “interdisciplinarity interlocks with the concerns of epistemology – the study of knowledge – and tends to be cent[er]ed around problems and issues that cannot be addressed or solved within the existing disciplines.”¹⁵

While the term, “intersectionality,” on one hand, refers to power structures and “bundl[ing] together ideas from disparate places, times and perspectives,”¹⁶ the term “interdisciplinarity,” on the other hand, refers to different disciplines in which these power structures are codified, organized and dispensed in particular kinds of ways as “conceptual structuring relationships.”¹⁷ In other words, if viewing white-supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy as separate disciplines that “contribute to the

7. Ibid, 145–147.

8. Ibid, 145.

9. Cfr. Robert Bocock, *Hegemony* (New York: Tavistock, 1986).

10. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 6 (1991): 1243.

11. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” in *Feminist Legal Theories*, ed. Karen Maschke (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23.

12. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 140.

13. Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

14. Julie Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 2.

15. Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

16. Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

17. Rebecca Green, Carol A. Bean and Sung H. Myaeng, ed., *The Semantics of Relationships: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), viii.

social structuring of meaning,¹⁸ whereby each becomes a knowledge community,¹⁹ then, taken together, hooks' approach to white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy becomes interdisciplinary, by "integrat[ing] knowledge from two or more disciplines so as to generate an increase in understanding the causes of a complicated problem,"²⁰ such as Black womanhood. Indeed, insofar as "intersectionality," for hooks, is concerned with construing how Black womanhood is based on "power relations of race, class and gender [which] are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together,"²¹ these intersecting power relations arise "in a given society at a given time."²²

It is within a given society at a given time that the notion of Black womanhood, as an intersectionality of "historical linkages and systemic interrelationships"²³ carries specific meanings, as hooks conceives it, from white-supremacy to capitalism, from capitalism to patriarchy, and from patriarchy to white-supremacy, with each discipline pointing to a particular means of knowledge management²⁴ about Black womanhood. Yet, though white-supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy each harbor a "knowledge organization system" about what Black womanhood is, integrating the three together, as hooks does, suggests that "knowledge organization should best facilitate interdisciplinarity."²⁵ To hooks, the integration of the three disciplines of white-supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy into the interdisciplinary relationship of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy becomes a new category of knowledge, signaling "interdisciplinary activity, the reasons for boundary permeation, and the boundary work that occurs in interdisciplinary practices."²⁶ In a fundamental way for hooks' purposes, "interdisciplinarity seeks to integrate the insights from multiple disciplines in order to generate a superior understanding of a particular question,"²⁷ insofar as white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy generates a superior understanding of a particular question about Black womanhood.

Given that hooks' conceptualization of Black womanhood, both through an interdisciplinarity of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy as a new category of knowledge and an intersectionality of race, racism, slavery and sexism as integral to multidimensional identity formation, she is also grappling with cultural hegemony as an organized phenomenon influencing the meaning and meaningfulness of Black womanhood. Like Gramsci's recognition of the need to "reorganize the cultural hegemony,"²⁸ hooks' advocacy for the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, firstly, radically conceives what a reorganization of cultural hegemony looks like for Black womanhood, secondly, uses rhetoric to articulate how cultural hegemony must be reorganized for the sake of Black womanhood, and thirdly, provides a feminist ideology as a framework to the extent that cultural hegemony becomes reorganized for the sake of Black womanhood.

When considering the very concept of hegemony, while setting aside the cultural descriptor and how it is imposed by capitalist patriarchy, for Gramsci, "the concept of hegemony is linked with a complex set of claims about what could be a coherent viewpoint on the world."²⁹ If "this perspective [is]

18. John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

19. Rick Szostak, Claudio Gnoli and María López-Huertas, *Interdisciplinary Knowledge Organization* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 1.

20. Dominic Holland, *Integrating Knowledge Through Interdisciplinary Research: Problems of Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.

21. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Medford: Polity, 2020), 4.

22. Ibid.

23. Bonnie T. Dill and Ruth E. Zambrana, "Critical Thinking about Inequality: An Emerging Lens," In *Emerging Intersections; Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Bonnie T. Dill and Ruth E. Zambrana (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1.

24. Meliha Handzic and Daniela Carlucci, "Knowledge Management, Arts and Humanities: Setting the Scene," In *Knowledge Management, Arts and Humanities: Interdisciplinary Approaches and the Benefits of Collaboration*, ed. Meliha Handzic and Daniela Carlucci (Cham: Springer, 2019), 3.

25. Szostak et al., *Interdisciplinary Knowledge Organization*, 1.

26. Klein, *Crossing Boundaries*, 2.

27. Szostak et al., *Interdisciplinary Knowledge Organization*, 1.

28. David Forgacs, ed., *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935* (New York: Schocken, 1988), 357.

29. Bocoock, *Hegemony*, 17.

only a coherent world-view, a well-rounded philosophy and related morality,” such that this world-view “could be hegemonic,”³⁰ then hooks’ advocacy for the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology encompasses a world-view. What makes this world-view “a well-rounded philosophy” and “related to morality,” as hooks would certainly agree, is that it acts as a countermovement to and against capitalist patriarchy, which, in itself, advances a world-view, works in terms of a well-rounded philosophy, and attends to a related morality. Because capitalist patriarchy, as hooks envisions it in *Ain’t I A Woman*, imposes a cultural hegemony, the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology develops historically as a response to or a reaction against that which oppresses within the capitalist patriarchal system. Out of this, the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology becomes a “way of grasping what is going on in the world and of living creatively in it.”³¹ Not only does the existence of a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology provide, in hooks’ view, Black women a means “of living creatively” within Black existence and womanhood, but it also provides Black women a “way of grasping what is going on in the world” for, to, and against Black existence and womanhood.

Like Gramsci’s social theory of hegemony, hooks’ radical rhetoric of feminist ideology “involves philosophical assumptions about epistemology, and about political and ethical values, which have to be addressed.”³² There are, in fact, philosophical assumptions about epistemology inherent in hooks’ radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, which are, in one sense, enumerated to make sense out of and make explicit what Black women are at the intersection of Black existence and womanhood, while, in another sense, enumerated to make sense and make explicit what Black women do when capitalist patriarchy imposes cultural hegemony upon them. To mouth a radical rhetoric for what Black women are and against what cultural hegemony imposes upon Black women to do, then, means employing political and ethical values, while also engaging in a revolutionary resistance that makes sense out of and makes explicit capitalist patriarchal hegemony. Just as “Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to describe and analy[z]e how modern capitalist societies were organized, or aimed to be organized, in the past and present,”³³ hooks grapples with a version of cultural hegemony in *Ain’t I A Woman* that incorporates a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology to describe and analyze how capitalist patriarchy is “organized, or aimed to be organized” in the past and the present. Because *Ain’t I A Woman* attends to “the history of, the theoretical challenges to, and the patriarchal structures imposed on Black women,”³⁴ hooks’ radical rhetoric of feminist ideology is as much couched in the past, in terms of the capitalist patriarchies of slavery, the Reconstruction era, and Jim Crow, as it is situated in the present, “for what it means to be a Black woman in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Era: the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power movement, blaxploitation films, and even James H. Cone’s development of Black theology.”³⁵ Both the past and the present, for hooks, hold historical and immediate exigencies, respectively speaking, on how the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology give a retrospective and contemporary account of Black women subjected to capitalist patriarchal hegemony.

In the vein of Gramscian Marxism, hooks’ radical rhetoric of feminist ideology makes sense out of and makes explicit capitalist patriarchal hegemony, through “three major terms [that] identify discrete, albeit interconnected, areas in a social formation which form the baseline for the conceptualization of hegemony.”³⁶ As Gramsci originally considers them, and by which hooks is most assuredly operating methodologically, the economic, the state and civil society are all,³⁷ if reminded of what Gramsci’s social theory of hegemony is, epistemologies that carry philosophical assumptions, just as all three carry values that espouse and have political and ethical ramifications. The areas of the

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid, 19.

33. Ibid, 27.

34. Hue Woodson, “hooks, bell (1952–2021),” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer and Chris Rojek (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 1.

35. Ibid.

36. Bocock, *Hegemony*, 33.

37. Ibid.

economic, the state and civil society intersect as discrete but interconnected dimensions that gather together and inform radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, such that the constituent elements of radicalism, rhetoricity and feminism become narrower ideologies respectively confronting civil society, the state and the economic. If viewing hooks' radical rhetoric of feminist ideology this way, how it subsequently confronts capitalist patriarchal hegemony is by also acknowledging the extent that capitalist patriarchal hegemony is, in itself, a gathering together of the economic, the state and civil society, respectively construed.

Given that this capitalist patriarchal hegemony is imbued with "philosophical assumptions about epistemology" as well as those "about political and ethical values," hooks' radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, in its respective handlings of civil society, the state and the economic, attends to, hooks ascertains in *Ain't I A Woman*, "a thorough understanding of the Black female experience and our relationship to society as a whole only by examining both the politics of racism and sexism from a feminist perspective."³⁸ If contextualizing this against how Gramsci "sought to emphasize the political,"³⁹ hooks holds analogous concerns, insofar as her own emphasis on the political, to hooks' point, is intent on Black womanhood's "struggle for liberation," as that which "takes place within a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people."⁴⁰ What this means, then, is that there is a liberational component to hooks' radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, where it is concerned with "degrees of unfreedom on a spectrum" of Black womanhood's class position.⁴¹

Indeed, insofar as *Ain't I A Woman* is implicitly drawing upon a Gramscian Marxism, focused on liberating Black womanhood from capitalist patriarchal hegemony, hooks is also explicitly embodying an intellectual insurgent stance, to the extent that her radical rhetoric of feminist ideology works at the methodological intersection of activism, religiosity and the public sphere.⁴² For that matter, hooks' radical rhetoric of feminist ideology contextualizes and speaks to what is fundamentally consequential to subaltern studies, for the likes of Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), and Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988).

Take Bhabha for instance, with his understanding "the work of hegemony [as] the process of iteration and differentiation"⁴³ expressed through policy. This process of "iteration and differentiation," to Bhabha's point in *The Location of Culture*, is precisely what hooks describes as capitalist patriarchy, insofar as capitalist patriarchy iterates about and differentiates Black women, in particular, from white men by way of capitalist patriarchal policies against Black women and in favor of white men – because of this, to hooks' broader point, feminist ideology cannot simply reform the cultural hegemony of capitalist patriarchy from within this system of policies, but, rather, must revolt against that which iterates about and differentiates Black women. Similarly, though more contemporarily to hooks, given what Said explains in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, it is possible to read hooks alongside Said's assertion that "in the transmission and persistence of a culture is a continual process of reinforcement, by which the hegemonic culture will add to itself [...] exterior forms and assertions of itself."⁴⁴ To this, the transmission and persistence of American culture, for hooks, becomes a continual process of the reinforcement of capitalist patriarchy, to the extent that Black women become an "exterior form" and an "assertion" of hegemonic culture—not only must feminist ideology acknowledge this, but it must also, as hooks makes it clear, deploy a radical rhetoric that can speak more forthrightly against the systemic nature of the continual process through which capitalist patriarchy reinforces subalternity for Black women. Yet, when conceptualizing radical rhetoric, if at all, it must be framed in terms of a particular kind of speaking—for hooks' approach to feminist ideology, radical rhetoric involves speaking to, speaking against, and speaking for the subaltern realities of Black women, when those subaltern

38. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 13.

39. Bocock, *Hegemony*, 35.

40. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 13.

41. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 215.

42. Hue Woodson, "Between Activism, Religiosity, and the Public Sphere: The Intellectual Insurgency of bell hooks," *Journal of African American Studies*, 23, 3 (2019): 187–202.

43. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 29–30.

44. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 14.

realities are intimately tied to the systems of suppression within and the systemic oppression of capitalist patriarchy. If this is viewed from the standpoint of Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak,⁴⁵ then it allows for an understanding that Black women's radical rhetoric, even when mouthing feminist ideology, because of subalternity, cannot speak within the capitalist patriarchy—for hooks, this is the problem with what she sees as the focus of the contemporary feminist movement on reform, since, in reforming only capitalist patriarchy, Black women still cannot speak.

If the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology is a prerequisite to resistance, then this resistance must do more than reform – in this sense, radical rhetoric of feminist ideology that seeks to only reform capitalist patriarchy becomes complacent to the overarching subalternity of Black women, since reform does little to change the systematic effects and systemic nature of cultural hegemony. Such reforms operate within the constraints of modernity. It is only through revolution, as hooks sees it, enacted through a postmodern mode of resistance, that it is possible for the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology to more effectively circumvent the subaltern structures of capitalist patriarchy against Black women, in order to articulate more fully, more meaningfully, and more existentially that which is being resisted, how resistance takes place, and why resistance is being enacted.

As hooks conceives it, feminist ideology attends to a what-question, in terms of what must be articulated about the capitalist patriarchal system, while resistance points to a how-question, in terms of how feminist ideology becomes embodied into meaningful and tangible action—both, it seems to me, point to an overarching why-question: why are feminist ideology and resistance necessary at all? The why-question concerns itself with the capitalist patriarchal system—the reason why feminist ideology and resistance are necessary is that both are required to challenge the capitalist patriarchy system, for the sake of understanding how “sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of Black women.”⁴⁶ Essentially, to the very extent that, as hooks points out, “institutionalized sexism—that is, patriarchy—formed the base of the American social structure along with racial imperialism,”⁴⁷ only feminist ideology conceives of this in its historical, cultural, social, economic and psychological significance. This collective significance, for hooks, arises from a network of concerns that provide “a retrospective examination of the Black female slave experience,”⁴⁸ which, through the mechanisms in and machinations of the capitalist patriarchal system, lays bare a political order that oppresses systematically and systemically towards the “continued devaluation of Black womanhood.”⁴⁹

Not only does the capitalist patriarchal system become “essentially corrupt,”⁵⁰ but it also undermines the ability of the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology to be as transgressive, or as insurgent, as it needs to be. Indeed, this is so, for the sake of effectively critiquing what is essentially corrupt about the capitalist patriarchal system itself, in light of what cultural hegemony means to hooks. Yet, more importantly, in articulating what the capitalist patriarchal system is and does, the transgressive thought of feminist ideology and its radical rhetoric ascertains the intersectional relations between gender, race and class, as well as surmising the intersectional roles that the histories of policies and institutions play in the intellectual development of the question of the meaning of Black womanhood. If this question is fundamentally rooted in the extent that “a devaluation of Black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery,” hooks argues, “that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years,”⁵¹ then this becomes the methodological focal point of transgressive thought with its interdisciplinarity arising across a series of domains that mythologize Black womanhood and “the nature of the Black female experience.”⁵²

45. Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66–111.

46. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 15.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid, 52.

50. Ibid, 191.

51. Ibid, 54.

52. Ibid, 86.

While *Ain't I A Woman* prescribes and sets forth the task of hooks' transgressive thought as an entanglement of feminist ideology, radical rhetoric and resistance, this transgressive thought is developed in the intersectional spheres of the social, the economic and the cultural, insofar as hooks is concerned not only with the socio-economic, but also the economic-cultural and the socio-cultural, all of which speak to the demands of the intellectual life of Black women in the United States. In this way, the method of her transgressive thought, in terms of her Blackness, her womanhood and her intellectualism, can be outlined as an entangled interdisciplinarity between the histories of policies and institutions, the relations of gender, race and class, and the pervasiveness of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. All of this is laid bare by enacting a postmodern notion of resistance, which is launched by the insurgency about, the pervasiveness to and the transgressive nature of the *nom de plume* of "bell hooks" itself.⁵³

But also, given that *Ain't I A Woman* prescribes a method to hooks' transgressive thought, there is a particular praxis to her transgressive method: literature and literary criticism. When thinking in terms of what the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology looks like when engaged in literary criticism, as a succinct mode of transgressive thought, hooks' unpublished dissertation on Toni Morrison views Morrison as enacting a postmodern notion of resistance, insofar as Morrison's novels are guided by a feminist ideology and articulate a radical rhetoric.

Though lesser-known, still unpublished and largely unexplored, hooks' earliest means of enacting a postmodern notion of resistance, bringing together hooks' earlier concerns with feminist ideology and radical rhetoric, can be traced to her 1983 dissertation, "Keeping a Hold on Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction," for the University of California, Santa Cruz, writing under her given name, Gloria Watkins.⁵⁴ This dissertation is not only related to the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology espoused in *Ain't I A Woman*, but the dissertation also lays bare hooks' ongoing concerns with what a Gramscian-Marxist cultural hegemony means to and for Black womanhood in the interdisciplinary relationship between notions of race and racism through white-supremacy, the effects of slavery through capitalism, and the imposition of sexism through patriarchy.

It is impossible, now, to say if hooks ever intended to publish this dissertation, insofar as it "has become a very obscure and overlooked text among hooks' early work," especially as the only text she authored without her *nom de plume* of "bell hooks."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, hooks' dissertation remains significant, however dated it may be, where it can be viewed as an enactment of a postmodern of resistance, in her transgressive reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). To the extent that hooks' dissertation advances "the meaning and meaningfulness of Black womanhood and Black femininity, early constructions of the relationship between Blackness, identity, and gender, and interests in the hegemonic structures of patriarchy,"⁵⁶ it is clear that her transgressive readings of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are a means of resistive praxis based on her theoretical endeavors of transgressive thought.

What makes hooks' reading of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* so transgressive is that it enacts a postmodern of resistance against feminist analysis and, more importantly, Black feminist criticism of the day, from the likes of Barbara Smith and Deborah E. McDowell, who, in 1977 and 1980 respectively, sought to subsume Morrison into a canonical idea of Black women's literature, to which Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker and Alice Walker, in Smith's and McDowell's views, all belong. Not only does hooks directly challenge this in terms of how *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* articulate Black feminism, but she also believes that the two novels attend to a radical feminism. However, though hooks acknowledges that Smith, in particular, provides a radical feminist take on *Sula*, insofar as Smith sees *Sula* as articulating a Black lesbianism,⁵⁷ hooks sees Smith's reading of *Sula*'s Black lesbianism as an impossible classifica-

53. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991).

54. Woodson, "hooks, bell," 2.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Gloria J. Watkins, "Keeping a Hold on Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction," PhD dissertation (University of California, Santa Cruz: 1983), 107.

tion,⁵⁸ undermined by how the novel “uphold[s] male supremacy, the primacy of heterosexuality, and the centrality of the authoritarian family.”⁵⁹ Similarly, hooks sees the same male supremacy working in *The Bluest Eye*, such that “the exploitation and dehumanization that makes class privilege possible is all pervasive.”⁶⁰ While, for hooks, *The Bluest Eye* depicts “systems of domination via repression within the family,” towards an “authoritarian adult rule,”⁶¹ she articulates a similar understanding about the women in *Sula*, concluding that “they achieve power only by surrendering some part of themselves,”⁶² where they relinquish themselves, through their autonomies and agencies, for the sake of “clinging to the philosophy of male supremacy.”⁶³

Given that hooks finds that both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* “provide interesting perspective[s] on the changing nature of Black communities within a society where they are controlled by others,”⁶⁴ and to the extent that this occurs as a result of how both communities uphold male supremacy, both attend to the ways in which Black women are powerless, and how this powerlessness is systemic of not just male supremacy, but also systemic of how “more than racism, the effects of capitalist expansion threaten the continuity of Black life.”⁶⁵ Indeed, for hooks, this capitalist expansion arises from “the individualist capitalist consumer society”⁶⁶ depicted in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. But also, to a certain extent, this capitalist expansion is connected to and a byproduct of “the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure,” which, hooks notes, Morrison acknowledges, particularly in *The Bluest Eye*.⁶⁷ In light of what a white dominated capitalist superstructure means to “the continuity of Black life,” though it is in *The Bluest Eye* that Morrison, hooks explains, “portrays the way in which Black people absorb the colonizing mentality and perpetrate systems of domination – classism, racism and sexism,” hooks sees in *Sula*, conversely, how the titular character “rebel[s] against the community and must resist conformity to fixed social norms,” precisely as a means of demonstrating “their refusal to accept domination.”⁶⁸

In these particular kinds of ways, hooks’ sense of domination for Black women, in her readings of both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, is always-already tied to male supremacy, and this male supremacy always-already functions in supporting patriarchy, wherein hooks’ conceptualizations of Black male supremacy and Black patriarchy allow for Black life to hold continuity with and perpetuate systems of domination related the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure. Behind this, there is undoubtedly hooks’ use of Marxist social analysis, not only when considering hooks’ recognition of a “larger power structure”⁶⁹ in *The Bluest Eye*, but also when taking into account that *The Bluest Eye* contains a “social organization”⁷⁰ that is analogous to the “social organization” in *Sula*.⁷¹ How this larger power structure works within social organizations depicted respectively in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* is, hooks more broadly argues, through the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure which, in itself, operates from the standpoint of what hooks calls a “bourgeois ideology.”⁷² Even though hooks uses this term, to the best of my knowledge, three times, and in each case, always in relation to

58. Ibid, 110.

59. Ibid, 108.

60. Ibid, 37.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid, 89.

63. Ibid, 94.

64. Ibid, 130.

65. Ibid, 131.

66. Ibid, 130.

67. Ibid, 39.

68. Ibid, 101.

69. Ibid, 39.

70. Ibid, 40.

71. Ibid, 120.

72. Ibid, 24.

her reading of *The Bluest Eye*, there are implicit traces of hooks' sense of "bourgeois ideology" in the "important spheres of power for individual women" in *Sula*.⁷³

In speaking to the acknowledgment that "within the Western literary tradition the novel has frequently been used as a political tool to reinforce and maintain bourgeois ideology,"⁷⁴ hooks views Morrison's work as being fundamentally transgressive against this and, in turn, transgressive against how the Western literary tradition reinforces and maintains the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure. To this end, hooks argues, "*The Bluest Eye* is fundamentally an anti-bourgeois text,"⁷⁵ while it also fundamentally challenges, questions and deconstructs the very existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure. Including *Sula* in this context, it becomes evident that both novels, when expanding hooks' sentiments more explicitly and declaratively, are "neither rooted in the circumstances of the ruling class" nor do they "justify and perpetuate the hegemony of that class."⁷⁶ Though the term "hegemony," appearing here, is referenced only once, it remains integral to how hooks conceives of the workings of classism, racism and sexism in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, as well as how classism, racism and sexism are all integral, for hooks, to how the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure is reinforced hegemonically and sustained hegemonically.

To hooks' readings of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the justification and perpetuation of hegemony depend on two other terms that hooks uses: "patriarchy" and "capitalist." Just as the term "patriarchy" appears in only three instances, and the term "capitalist" makes eight appearances, along with "hegemony," the three concepts become a matrix of concerns for hooks, playing a more prominent role in hooks' readings of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* than they seem, as well as how the three interconnected terms relate to another term in its two derivative forms: "imperialist" and "imperialism," appearing twice each. This collection of terms contributes to a methodology about the relationship between Black women and the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure, as that which can be read into and interpreted from the fictional worlds of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. If, hooks explains, "by showing in the two works that the situation of Black people in relation to the dominant culture varies from community to community,"⁷⁷ and in doing so, "Morrison does what historians have failed to do," the transgressive way Morrison presents "modes of perception, ways of seeing reality"⁷⁸ becomes a model for hooks' own transgressive thought rooted in how Black women keep a hold on life.

As pivotal as it is to hooks' early intellectual development, "Keeping a Hold on Life" is in dialogue with hooks' earlier *Ain't I A Woman* text. It may be possible to view hooks' dissertation title in relation to how the earlier text's title is adopted from Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech, when one of the ways that Black women keep a hold on life, as hooks seems to suggest, is through mouthing a radical rhetoric about existential implications of and contingencies about being a Black woman in the United States. That is to say, it is not only that "keeping a hold on life" is about the rhetorical significance of explicitly asserting Black womanhood, but it is also about how the rhetorical significance of claiming Black womanhood, and making it explicit, is a radical move towards "keeping a hold on life." In this sense, the question inherent in the title of *Ain't I A Woman* is, in fact, answered by hooks' dissertation, though in a decidedly two-fold nature: firstly, it is with hooks' own transgressive reading of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, and secondly, it is with Morrison's transgressive creation of the fictional worlds in the transgressive writing of two novels. The two-fold significance, then, of hooks' dissertation is, on one hand, what hooks' transgressive reading of Morrison directly means to hooks' transgressive thought, as founded in *Ain't I A Woman*, and, on the other hand, what Morrison's transgressive fictional creations indirectly mean to hooks' transgressive thought.

Though the two arise in isolation, and nowhere in "Keeping a Hold on Life" does hooks mention or make reference to her *Ain't I A Woman*, there is a palpable relationship between the better-known text and the still lesser-known dissertation. There is clearly a cross-pollination of ideas from the for-

73. Ibid, 94.

74. Ibid, 24.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid, 131.

78. Ibid.

mer text to the latter, especially in how the former's assertion about the capitalist patriarchal system speaks to the latter's assertion about the white dominated capitalist superstructure. Certainly, while *Ain't I A Woman* is concerned with "critique[ing] how slavery impacted Antebellum Black females, how Black womanhood becomes devalued, how patriarchy exerts an imperialism over Black femininity,"⁷⁹ all of this serves as a methodological, historical and institutional pre-text to hooks' readings of Morrison, on the way towards a more robust, interdisciplinary articulation of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, as it is evoked in *Feminist Theory* (1984).

In *Feminist Theory*, hooks envisions this postmodern resistance as a "resistance struggle" predicated on "solidarity,"⁸⁰ wherein resistance, in terms of an intellectual insurgency, becomes a unified struggle, particularly for Black women, tempered by Black feminist ideology, against "the social hierarchy in white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy."⁸¹ Not only does hooks begin to approach the resistance struggle, in *Talking Back* (1989), as "an act of resistance" laid bare, on one hand, in "discovering an identity" as an expression of resistance⁸² and, on the other hand, in "the power of voice as gesture of rebellion and resistance urg[ing] the exploited, the oppressed to speak,"⁸³ but hooks also wishes to cast the resistance struggle in terms of "women seriously addressing [them]selves, not solely in relation to men, but in relation to an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part,"⁸⁴ with these other parts including white-supremacy and capitalism.

For hooks, the very notion of resistance attunes her transgressive thought, as that which, in itself, attunes hooks' transgressive conceptualizations of the oppositional gaze and critical pedagogy. From the standpoint of resistance, through talking back with radical rhetoric, hooks is not simply concerned with "a liberatory feminist movement aim[ing] to transform society [...] by challenging the politics of domination on all fronts,"⁸⁵ but, more importantly, she is more concerned with grounding the notion of resistance, through transgressively thinking about the politics of domination as both systemic politics and systemic domination, as well as to a broader feminist liberational pedagogy that can only be "truly revolutionary because [of] the mechanisms of appropriation within white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy."⁸⁶ These mechanisms are constructed around an "exclusionary practice of postmodern critical discourse,"⁸⁷ hooks writes in "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning* (1990), require changing, for the purposes of revolution rather than reform, through "enact[ing] a postmodernism of resistance"⁸⁸ against white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, as an interdisciplinarity of power, ideology and domination.

The extent to which hooks frequently returns to her transgressive critique of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy throughout her career, evoking it, at various points, in *Outlaw Culture* (1994), *Feminism for Everybody* (2000), *We Real Cool* (2004), and *Writing Beyond Race* (2013), is primarily affected through what it means to enact a postmodernism of resistance. Insofar as hooks expands her understanding of patriarchy in the essay, "Understanding Patriarchy," included in *The Will to Change* (2004), to imperialist, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, in order "to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics,"⁸⁹ there remains, for hooks, a modernist, humanist, and even colonizing interdisciplinarity of power, ideology and domination that can only be resisted by a postmodernist interdisciplinarity of transgressive thought through, for example, the methodological relationship between critical pedagogy and the notion of the oppositional gaze.

79. Woodson, "hooks, bell," 1.

80. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 44.

81. Ibid, 118.

82. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 109.

83. Ibid, 14.

84. Ibid, 25.

85. Ibid, 50.

86. Ibid, 51.

87. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 30.

88. Ibid.

89. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 1.

In light of her transgressive thought, hooks' oppositional gaze, as it is originally evoked in *Black Looks* (1992), is as much about attending to the corporeal demands of articulating a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology as it is about ensuring that this corporeal significance attends to "keeping a hold on life." The transgressive nature of what the oppositional gaze means to hooks is in what the corporeality of Black womanhood means, which certainly operates in the backgrounds of two texts: firstly, notions of cinematic Blackness in Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), and, secondly, though more implicitly, the significance of cinematic images in Jane Gaines's *Contested Culture* (1991). In both cases, there are critiques of the capitalist patriarchal system in terms of the white dominated capitalist superstructure, where, like hooks, Wallace and, to a lesser extent, Gaines, provide frameworks for thinking transgressively about Black womanhood. Consider Wallace's critique of sexism in Black communities depicted in cinema and Gaines's argument about "contested image-properties" toward cinematic language. For hooks, when thinking transgressively through Wallace, the oppositional gaze attempts to "critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze,"⁹⁰ with respect to the intersection of sexism, gender and Blackness, while, simultaneously, the oppositional gaze, when thinking transgressively through Gaines, "choose[s] not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator," with respect to the intersection of law, capitalism and property.⁹¹

To both ends, hooks envisions the oppositional gaze as a reaction to the capitalist patriarchal system in terms of the white dominated capitalist superstructure, insofar as the oppositional gaze is grounded on "Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession."⁹² These notions undoubtedly remind us of hooks' transgressive readings of Morrison, if we view Black womanhood in the two novels depicted as Black female spectators – this is so, not just in the ocular way the women of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* attend to "keeping a hold on life," but it is also in the ocular way that the capitalist patriarchal system in terms of the "white dominated capitalist superstructure" watching over Black womanhood in the fictional worlds of the respective texts. From hooks' handlings of these fictional worlds, she deploys an oppositional gaze necessary to retrospectively speak to the textual realities of Black womanhood, which becomes a means of contingently speaking to the cinematic realities of Black womanhood.

Even under the gaze of the capitalist patriarchal system in terms of "the white dominated capitalist superstructure," the oppositional gaze, and the critical pedagogy that deploys it, is committed to a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology and invested in "keeping a hold on life." For the sake of making sense of cinematic Blackness and making cinematic Black womanhood explicit, the oppositional gaze, on one hand, demythologizes the cinematic myth of the superwoman cited by Wallace and, on the other hand, articulates what Gaines refers to as "the drama of cultural contestation,"⁹³ as it is laid bare in popular cinema and television. Where hooks respectively intersects with and theoretically expands upon Wallace and Gaines is evidenced in situating the oppositional gaze, whether behind the camera or in front of it, against the colonizing gaze, the pornographic gaze, and the Eurocentric gaze in hooks' *Outlaw Culture* (1994) as well as against the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze in *Reel to Reel* (1996).

The theoretical proliferation of hooks' broader conceptualization of the oppositional gaze across the texts *Black Looks*, *Outlaw Culture* and *Reel to Reel* collectively conceive of the meaning, meaningfulness and extents of Black female spectatorship, which, in *Black Looks*, hooks proclaims that "mainstream feminist film criticism in no way acknowledges."⁹⁴ What hooks acknowledges, then, comes to bear upon Jacqueline Bobo's notion, in *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), that Black women's "collective actions are part of a sustained movement [...] within an interpretative community."⁹⁵ Because this interpretative community becomes what it is with hooks' oppositional gaze, the latter, to Bobo's

90. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 122.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

93. Jane M. Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), x.

94. hooks, *Black Looks*, 123.

95. Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 27.

point, “illuminates how Black women’s history of resistance to social domination forms the essence of their resistance to cultural domination.”⁹⁶ To this end, hooks’ sense of the same, in “the context of class exploitation, and racist and sexist domination,”⁹⁷ is particularly cinematically embodied in the ways and means that the oppositional gaze, and the critical pedagogy that deploys it, “enables production of feminist film theory that theorizes Black female spectatorship.”⁹⁸

For hooks, critical pedagogy, as she derives it from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, frames the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology as much as it orients Black womanhood towards “keeping a hold on life.” It is this critical pedagogy that grounds her transgressive thought for a sustained engagement with the meaning and meaningfulness of the experiences of Black women, standing theoretically alongside her conceptualization of the oppositional gaze. Not only does critical pedagogy intersect in particular ways with the oppositional gaze, insofar as both are rooted concrete actions that conceive of and confront institutional racism, systemic oppression and marginalized queerness, but, together, they also carry forward hooks’ epistemologies about hope, practical wisdom and freedom in her early readings of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* as a means of “keeping a hold on life.” This is so, through maintaining a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology about the “white dominated capitalist superstructure,” but also, to a certain degree, through a transgressive reading of Morrison that is as much about using an oppositional gaze as it is for Morrison implicitly using an oppositional gaze to depict her fictional worlds.

The very idea of “keeping a hold on life,” then, is tethered, firstly, to a critical pedagogy, and secondly, to the oppositional gaze, as two broader domains in her body of work, focused on her conceptualization of a “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.” When viewed this way, through the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, hooks offers intersectional feminist pedagogies to those two domains, situated in terms of pedagogies of hope, practical wisdom and freedom, as those which are respectively evidenced in her *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), *Teaching Community* (2003), and *Teaching Critical Thinking* (2010). The trilogy of texts informs the oppositional gaze, inasmuch as the oppositional gaze informs the trilogy, where notions of hope, practical wisdom and freedom are all fundamental, pedagogical strands interwoven into hooks’ intellectual insurgency. What is laid bare in hooks’ spirituality as religiosity, her social activism as political commitment, and her engagement in the public sphere as an intellectual is her insistence and persistence in enacting a postmodernism of resistance, through “keeping a hold on life,” through abiding by a critical pedagogy, through incorporating an oppositional gaze, and through using the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology against the interdisciplinarity of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

From *Ain’t I A Woman* to “Keeping a Hold on Life” to *Feminist Theory*, hooks’ transgressive thought follows a methodological through-line about how the meaning of the radical rhetoric of feminist ideology shapes the meaningfulness of “keeping a hold on life.” It is from this standpoint that hooks’ theorizes how Blackness and womanhood uniquely intersect in the existence of Black womanhood as the corporeal enactment of a postmodernism of resistance, insofar as Black womanhood, as hooks sees it, is always-already a transgressive existence. Common across hooks’ transgressive thought are the ways and means that the capitalist patriarchal system in terms of “the white dominated capitalist superstructure” lays bare a pervasive “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.” The pervasiveness of “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” must be transgressed, hooks finds, since the histories of policies and institutions that support “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” problematize the interdisciplinary relations of gender, race and class, through the social mechanisms of sexism, racism and classism. In order to confront these social mechanisms as they are, as hooks demonstrates, it requires a critical pedagogy and an oppositional gaze, which are capable of transgressively thinking through the extent that a “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” constructs constrictive, oppressive and repressive realities for Black womanhood beyond merely sexism, racism and classism and towards the inclusion of the political, the cultural and the economic.

As with the transgressive nature of “bell hooks,” as a *nom de plume*, enacting a postmodernism of

96. Ibid.

97. hooks, *Black Looks*, 126.

98. Ibid, 131.

resistance against what authorship is, if viewing what “bell hooks” does through the prism of partaking in a radical rhetoric of feminist ideology, it is possible to view the *nom de plume* of “bell hooks” itself as central to hooks’ transgressive thought, insofar as it puts in praxis a means of “keeping a hold on life,” just as much as it serves as a reaction to and critique of the interdisciplinarity of “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.”