

For bell hooks: “White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy” and “Feminism is for Everybody” in U.S. History and Politics

Paola Rudan

Matteo Battistini

Published: March 6, 2023

Abstract

This sixth issue of USAbroad aims to celebrate the importance and impact of bell hooks' work, which challenges the national and international boundaries of academic disciplines and of the cultural marketplace to present a “feminism for everybody,” accessible beyond national, academic and corporate languages.

Keywords: bell hooks; white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy; engaged pedagogy; transgressive thought; Black studies; women studies; critical thought.

Paola Rudan: University of Bologna (Italy)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5447-8945>

✉ paola.rudan@unibo.it; 🌐 <https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/paola.rudan>

Paola Rudan is Associate professor in History of Political Thought at the Department of History, University of Bologna. Her research focuses on the transatlantic dimension of Eighteenth and Nineteenth century political thought, and in particular on the revolutions in North America and France, the South American wars of independence and post-colonial constitutional process. Her research also addresses the history of women's political thought and feminist political theory. She is the author of monographs on Simón Bolívar's and Jeremy Bentham's social and political thought. Her latest book “Donna. Storia e critica di un concetto polemico” (Bologna, il Mulino, 2020) is being published with Brill (2023).

Matteo Battistini: University of Bologna (Italy)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7238-5470>

✉ m.battistini@unibo.it; 🌐 <https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/m.battistini/en>

Matteo Battistini is Associate Professor in American History and Politics at University of Bologna. His research interests are mainly directed to the construction of the American State in relation to the national and transnational transformations that have historically shaped its society and economy. Currently, his research focuses on the crisis and the rise of the American middle class and the role played by social sciences from New Deal to the eve of Cold War. He is author of numerous publications on important Italian and foreign journals and books. Among these: “Middle Class: An Intellectual History through Social Sciences” (Brill 2022).

To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class (bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 1981).

bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins in the rural and segregated South of the 1950s, rose to become one of the most influential scholars of feminism, cultural studies and pedagogy (not only) in the United States. She attended Stanford University through a scholarship at the time when the movements against the war in Vietnam, Black Power and feminism were at their peak. While the personal genesis of her original feminist thought was rooted in the experience of the poor, racist and patriarchal reality of the South, the period of her university studies marked the political beginning of a radical theoretical and historical analysis that made her one of the most innovative and popular intellectuals in the United States. As such, she was an intellectual who extended her teaching to the public outside of academy, even though she concluded her last day as Distinguished Professor at the City College of Brooklyn. Through her life and work, she reclaimed the “margin” as an “inclusive space” of “radical openness” where one can decide to “locate oneself” and from where to wage struggle. A space of “creativity and power” that now, since she passed away, is even more imperative to explore, not only to study her thought but also to shed new light on American politics and society from the racist, patriarchal foundation of American democracy through the watershed of the 1960s up to the present.

In 1981, bell hooks published her first book, whose title includes the words of the famous speech of the formerly enslaved, militant abolitionist and suffragist, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), that is, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. The volume—a collection of essays written between 1972 and 1973—identifies the historical and theoretical core of her writing in the indissoluble connection among class, race and gender: categories and structures of domination that liberation movements in the United States and around the world faced and keep facing. The question that is repeated throughout her intellectual production is the political urgency to not separate the three categories and structures, to consider how they act upon each other in the history of the present, to not fall into the fictitious primacy of one or the other in theory or historiography, as well as in public and political discourse. No history of slavery and racism is possible without taking sexism and classism into account. No feminist theory is practicable without addressing the problem of race and exploitation. The absolutization of one or of the other, or their hierarchization, generates the smokescreen of identity politics (and policies) that, through integrating and institutionalizing social groups who are “identical” by sex and race but not by class, consolidated structures of domination. In this way, identity politics have raised key issues to the feminist movement (and thought) when it does not consider racial and class hierarchy, and the Black movement (and thought) if it does not discuss the class and sex determination of the color line marking American democracy.

The dense pages of historical and theoretical analysis bell hooks devoted to the Black and the women's movements provide an invaluable source for reconsidering the history and theory of social movements from the 1960s to the present, along with the trajectory of Black studies, gender studies and cultural studies from their origins to their academic institutionalization, in light of “interlocking systems” of oppression and exploitation, domination and power, that she defined as a “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” which in later writings became “transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” For us, this definition stands as a complex yet immediately recognizable methodology for studying American politics and society in a transnational perspective. It allows us to historically see both the racial and class lines that traverse feminism, as well as the patriarchal and class drives that run through the Black movement, through African American families and communities, marking and maintaining globally the “US imperialist economic domination.” The “transnational white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” encapsulates the thread of her interdisciplinary and transgressive thought.

This sixth issue of *USAbroad* aims to celebrate the importance and impact of bell hooks' work, which challenges the national and international boundaries of academic disciplines and of the cultural marketplace to present a “feminism for everybody,” accessible beyond national, academic and corporate languages. From this transnational perspective, Maria Nadotti—the first Italian translator of bell hooks—reconstructs the *Publishing History of bell hooks in Italy* showing the link between her

writings and the history of the country where they are published, and therefore the transformation of the readers they are intended for. After some Italian translations at the end of the Twentieth century, only in the last seven years her name and some crucial points of her thought have returned to the fore. Some topics which, in Italy in the last century, seemed futuristic, for instance that of intersectionality of racism, sexism and classism, had visibly been progressively clarified, and proposed within society. This different and migrant Italy, no longer a white nation populated only by productive, well-off males and not willing to make the rest invisible, was finding its own words and its own theoretical benchmarks. Finally, bell hooks met her “public” and her work also became a resource for political practice in Italy too.

After this transnational route to the public discovery of bell hooks, the issue crosses the Atlantic again to analyze some relevant historical and conceptual junctures of her thought on American politics and society. Maria Mercone (Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra) places her work on the “politics of space” within the Black Radical Tradition, to highlight her theoretical influence in the ongoing dialogue on the relationship between Black communities and space. By defining Black radicalism as the specific political conscience that epistemologically informed the multiplicity of theories and practices of struggle throughout African American history, *The Homeplace, the Margin and the Classroom: Mapping Radical Liberation* focuses on hooks’ transformative takes on “politics of space” concerning the African American experience, from the diaspora to the segregated South, within the urban ghetto, the school and university in the second half of the last century. Her inputs contributed to framing the processes of production of space within the political tradition of Black radicalism by underlining how certain locations—the homeplace, the margin and the classroom—specifically fabricated to confine and oppress had been transformed into spaces of radical resistance and transgressive pedagogy.

The historicization of the engaged pedagogy of bell hooks is the focus of the essay *Repowering Intellectual Life. bell hooks and the Critique of Racial Education*. Roberta Ferrari (University of Bologna) shows how, in the face of the corporatization and globalization of the American university since the 1960s, hooks forged a radical vision of knowledge and education. Her pedagogy came about not only by an anti-capitalist critique of corporate academy, but also by a political reflection on the historical relationship between feminist and Black movements and transformations of educational system. hooks analyzed how these movements and the disciplines they helped to create challenged traditional knowledge and social conservatism; how the racism of white feminism and the denial of patriarchal power in Black movement weakened women’s and Black studies and prevented them from resisting an institutionalization that integrated them in order to deradicalize them. Starting from this American history, Ferrari highlights that hooks reframed a front of contestation within the academy and in communication with the world outside it, questioning the division between university and society. In this way, she restored to teaching the radical meaning of transgression of any “bureaucratization of the mind”: learning is about opening a revolutionary process of social transformation.

Indeed, bell hooks identified resistance in conjunction not with reform, but with revolution. The conjunction with revolution was fundamental to ensuring that feminism did not establish itself within the “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” The women’s movement of the 1970s failed to the extent that it took place in the framework of the more powerful cultural system that encouraged women (and men) to place the fulfilment of individual aspirations above their desire for collective transformation. Facing such failure, bell hooks conceptualized Black woman as uniqueness—shaped historically by slavery and capitalism, culturally by patriarchy and sexism, and socially by race and racism—that can confront racist capitalistic patriarchy finding in feminism not a means of reform, but a way of revolution. Given that conceptualization of Black woman, Hue Woodson (Tarrant County College) analyzes hooks’ work—particularly the lesser-known dissertation *Keeping a Hold on Life* (1983) on Toni Morrison—to point out how she framed a transgressive thought that grapples with the problem of hegemony, challenges a cultural system in which sexism, racism and classism are all integral to how the existence of a “white dominated capitalist superstructure” is reinforced hegemonically and sustained hegemonically. *“To Enact a Postmodernism of Resistance”: The Transgressive Thought of bell hooks and the Interdisciplinarity of White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy* reconstructs the “radical rhetoric of feminist ideology” through which she worked out and worked through a revolutionary critique of how the

Black woman attended and attends to “keeping a hold on life,” transgressively fighting against the pervasiveness of “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” in the past and in the present.

bell hooks in the present of the contemporary neoliberal society is the focus of the column *Bringing History Back In*. Beginning with a critical reading of the obituaries that celebrate hooks in the mainstream media, segregating her voice to the past and making of her an “icon of corporate multiculturalism” that she would have criticized, Paola Rudan (University of Bologna) points out her scientific, public and political relevance today. The historical depth of hooks’ inquiry is so important for the present not only because she was among the first to systematically unveil the patriarchal and racist roots of the capitalism born out of slavery, but also because her work is itself produced within changing historical conditions between the Sixties and Eighties, that is during the emergence of the neoliberal program which, fostered in the United States by neoconservatives, shaped our present. The integration of antagonistic cultures such as feminism and Black resistance within capitalist society and political institutions, and their commodification into fashionable and consumable identities, accompanied by the public rise of notions of individual accountability and personal responsibility while Black women and poor were blamed, marked the neutralization of their oppositional capacity. This neutralization led hooks to recognize the centrality of class domination and conflict, and to focus— in dialogue with Stuart Hall—not on a critique of the relationships of production, but rather on the ideological conditions of their social reproduction. Her understanding of the ideological function of mass media therefore highlights the link between representation and social reproduction. On this analytical basis, the “margin” emerges as an epistemic and political stance. *Speaking the Unspeakable. bell hooks’ Living Political Discourse* stresses that, far from being only an objective condition, the “margin” is the site from which to activate the partial perspective of the Black woman over social reproduction and its ideological conditions: the possibility of politicizing a difference against the capitalist valorization of identities.

Through the broad scope of this issue, we can therefore conclude that bell hooks’ interdisciplinary and transgressive thought, her theoretical critique and her transnational perspective on American history, not only shed new light on American politics and society from the racist, patriarchal foundation of American democracy to the rise of neoconservatism and neoliberalism, but also left behind a “living political discourse” that still questions our new millennium present, allowing us to “speak the unspeakable.”