

How Do You Practice Intersectionalism?

An Interview with bell hooks

Randy Lowens

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This interview originally appeared in *Northeastern Anarchist* #15 in 2011 – *In June of 2009 bell hooks agreed to be interviewed. We met at a local coffee shop and, over bagels and espresso drinks, discussed her books, politics and thoughts on recent events such as the economic downturn. I found her as forthright in person as on the page and with a subtle wit not always apparent (to me) in her writing. For example, after the interview we were approached by a local lawyer who was curious what publication she was being interviewed for. She cut her eyes at me and said, “Tell the man who the interview is for.” Upon learning I was anarchist, the lawyer mouthed familiar clichés about disorganization. hooks, a hint of a grin playing at the corners of her mouth, responded, “Yes, yes, it’s all about license for the individual!”*

Randy: We’re interviewing bell hooks, author of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* and numerous other titles. You’re known to be a prolific author: do you have a personal favorite? Is there any one title that someone unfamiliar with your work should read first?

hooks: My work is so eclectic; it spans such a broad spectrum. I guess if you look at my children’s books, I like *Be Boy Buzz* the best. If you look at the love books, I like *All About Love* the best. If you look at the theory books, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* is one of my favorites. It’s a good thing not to have to choose one. I think part of Western metaphysical dualism is, we’re always being asked to choose one over the other. I’m lucky. I think it’s good that I have a body of work that addresses different things in different ways.

Randy: You don’t capitalize your name? Why is that?

hooks: When the feminist movement was at its zenith in the late 60’s and early 70’s, there was a lot of moving away from the idea of the person. It was: let’s talk about the ideas behind the work, and the people matter less. It was kind of a gimmicky thing, but lots of feminist women were doing it. Many of us took the names of our female ancestors—bell hooks is my maternal great grandmother—to honor them and debunk the notion that we were these unique, exceptional women. We wanted to say, actually, we were the products of the women who’d gone before us.

Randy: The books of yours I’m most familiar with—the two I cited—are a work of political theory and, the other, a work of cultural criticism. Do you see those as distinctly different? Is there any clear line between the cultural and the political?

hooks: I would say one difference with the political writings, whether about feminism or class, is that the intent is to change how people think of a certain political reality; whereas with cultural criticism, the goal is to illuminate something that is already there. For example, the contemporary movie *Crash* I thought was a very weak statement about race and class. That was already there in the film. What I did in having a conversation about it was illuminate why it was a weak analysis of race and class. “It’s people; we’re all racist.” That’s just another bullshit way of people not wanting to name the power and institutionalized strength of white supremacy. We all may have prejudices, but we’re not all part of a system that reinforces, reinvents and reaffirms itself every day of our lives, systemically.

Randy: You mentioned your children’s books. I think last time we spoke, you were preparing to publish a book, *Happy to be Nappy*?

hooks: *Happy to be Nappy* was my first children’s book. I think when we saw each other I was in the production of *Grump Groan Growl* which was about anger.

Randy: I read that one to my daughter, by the way.

hooks: Oh yeah?

Randy: Do you have anything to say about the distinction? Are these books in any way political? We have a political audience.

hooks: They absolutely are. Both books were written to counter racism, patriarchy or both. Especially *Be Boy Buzz* was written to say, “We don’t really live in a culture that loves boys or loves children, and we don’t encourage boys to be whole.” I wanted to write a non-patriarchal book that would proclaim the love of boys.

Randy: (Pause) Some of my questions are written kind of wordy. (Laughter)

hooks: You shouldn’t worry about that.

Randy: You’re known, especially within our circles, for popularizing intersectional theory as opposed to reductionisms. Can you say a little bit about how intersectional theory plays out in practice? That is to say, your typical class reductionist at least has a priority; a Black Nationalist has something to prioritize. How do you practice intersectionalism?

hooks: Intersectionality allow us to focus on what is most important at a given point in time. I used to say to people, if you’re in a domestic situation where the man is violent, patriarchy and male domination—even though you understand it intersectionally—you focus, you highlight that dimension of it, if that’s what is needed to change the situation. I think that, again, if we move away from either/or thinking, and if we think, okay, every day of my life that I walk out of my house I am a combination of race, gender, class, sexual preference and religion or what have you, what gets foregrounded? I think it’s crazy for us to think that people don’t understand what’s being foregrounded in their lives at a given point in time. Like right now, for many Americans, class is being foregrounded like never before because of the economic situation. It doesn’t mean that race doesn’t matter, or gender doesn’t matter, but it means that right now in many people’s lives, in the lives of my own family members, people are losing jobs, insurance. I was teasing my brother that he was penniless, homeless, jobless. Right now in his life, racism isn’t the central highlighting force: it’s the world of work and economics. It doesn’t mean that he isn’t influenced by racism, but when he wakes up in the morning the thing that’s driving his world is really issues of class, economics and power as they articulate themselves. I guess I wish we could talk about: what does it mean to have a politics of intersectionality that also privileges what form of domination is most oppressing us at a given moment in time.

Randy: I'm reminded of Murray Bookchin and the analogy of society to ecology. Were you at all influenced by that?

hooks: No.

Randy: Do you have any opinions of the modern day anarchist movement, globally or here in the USA? It's almost nonexistent here in the South.

hooks: Sadly, anarchy has gotten such a bad name. We don't really see much evidence of it because people associate it with reckless abandon, which we both know it's not. I think we have to talk about educating the people for critical consciousness about what anarchy is. I would also say that, in practice, many more Americans are anarchists than would ever use that term.

Randy: It's clear from your books that you oppose capitalism. Do you think capitalism can be reformed, or must it be overthrown? Do you consider yourself a revolutionary in that sense?

hooks: I see myself, in terms of the question of capitalism, as I would support democratic socialism over a capitalist system, because any approach... or participatory economics, which is another great model that people like Michael Albert are putting out there... any system that encourages us to think about interdependency, and to be able to use the world's resources in a wiser way, for the good of the whole, would be better for the world than capitalism. Capitalism is fucking up the planet, we know that. But let's say, imperialism and capitalism together... I mean let's face it, war in its essence is another form of capitalism. Wars make people rich—and they make a lot of people poor, and they take a lot of people's lives away from them. We know that so much of the war that is happening is the attempt of one group to snatch the resources of another group.

Randy: Competitive economics taken to its logical extreme.

hooks: Exactly.

Randy: I was taken to task by a feminist anarchist for taking the liberty of referring to you by your first name. The criticism was: had you been a male I wouldn't have been so quick to have done that.

hooks: I think this is the kind of trivial personal stuff people focus on that has very little meaning. I don't think it matters. To me, I think if someone read my work, they'd know I don't have issues around how I'm identified. Even when people capitalize my name, I don't freak out, even though that would not be my choice. I'm not attached to it, and in that sense I think we have to choose, what are the issues that really matter? We have to trust that. You have to trust that if you are calling my name in a way that is offensive to me, I'm going to share it with you. But you also have to know what your feelings are behind calling me "bell." I think we are obsessed in the U.S. with the personal, in ways that blind us to more important issues of life. I just think if we could take all the obsession with the personal (inaudible), and personal judgment and have people be concerned about the environment, what a different world we would live in. Or race... ending racism. It's like, I was talking about Cornell West once, and somebody was saying to me, "Cornell is not a preacher; he's not ordained"—and another preacher friend of mine said, "I don't know about the importance of his being ordained. I saw him give a sermon. Lots of people joined the church and that would seem to be what being a preacher is all about." We have to look at the substance of something rather than the shadow. Is it more important that you, as a white male, read my work and learn from it, or what you call me? I think it's more important that you read my work, reflect on it, and allow it to transform your life and your thinking in some way.

Now I do get a little pissed at people who write me and want me to do things, and spell my name wrong.

Randy: I have read, from someone else, that your work is influenced by postmodernism. Is that true? Do you have an opinion about the end of history, in particular?

hooks: No. If anything I think postmodernism has the least impact on my work. My work is mostly influenced by the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. To the extent that we live in a postmodern world and it shapes the concrete circumstances of our daily lives, I would say postmodernism affects my work or influences my work. But in general, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about postmodernism.

Randy: The final question that I wrote down, I think we've already touched on to a certain degree. Some political groups say they are against classism, and that often sounds to me like they're saying they avoid prejudice on the basis of class, but don't oppose structural capitalism. I think you've already talked about the personal versus the systemic aspects of...

hooks: One of the things my work *Where We Stand: Class Matters* tried to do was say, "We're a country that would rather talk about race than class." I think what's so amazing about this historical moment is that it is bringing class to the fore and we have to think about the nature of work and hierarchy. When I think about the auto-industry and how it was one of the industries that brought all of these black men from the South to Michigan and other places to make more money than they could ever make in the cotton fields or the agricultural world of the South... what's happening now is all of that is closing down, and we know that it's going to reopen in Southern places, focusing on Mexican and other migrant workers to come and work cheaply and get none of the benefits. All of this stuff is amazing in terms of forcing people in this society to think more openly about class and about the intersectionalities.

The whole thing with Joe the Plumber—and then to find out that so much about Joe the Plumber was just fake—was the use of class (of white supremacy and class) to awaken old prejudices, to allow for a denial of the true impact of intersectionalities and class. The white worker who has been displaced at General Motors has more in common with the displaced black worker than those larger white CEO's, and those Wall Street people who are determining their fate... whose thievery and greed is determining their fate.

It's interesting to look at all the aspects where everyday Americans, many of whom are not college educated, are thinking deeply now about our economic structure. See the way credit cards have exploited the working class and the working poor? I think it's going to be an interesting next ten years for the United States. For people like me, what is important and vital is to keep that education for critical consciousness around intersectionalities, so that people are able to not focus on one thing and blame one group, but be able to look holistically at the way intersectionality informs all of us: whiteness, gender, sexual preferences, etc. Only then can we have a realistic handle on the political and cultural world we live within.

Randy: That's all of my questions. Do you have anything to say to our audience, off the cuff?

hooks: Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchy is, dare to go against the grain of the conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope.

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*This interview originally appeared in *Northeastern Anarchist* #15 in 2011. Randy Lowens, the pen name of Don Jennings, who passed away March 8, 2012, in Richmond, Kentucky. **#RestInPower** Randy was a supporter of NEFAC (North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists).*

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