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# Review: Black Feminist Cultural Criticism by Jacqueline Bobo: Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics by bell hooks: Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center by bell hooks

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Review: Book Reviews

Reviewed Work(s): Black Feminist Cultural Criticism by Jacqueline Bobo: Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics by bell hooks: Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center by bell hooks

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## Book Review

*Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Edited by Jacqueline Bobo. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001.

*Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. By bell hooks. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000.

*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. By bell hooks. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000.

**Daphne Lamothe, *Smith College***

**T**he reprint of bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* appeared in the same year as her more populist volume, *Feminism Is for Everybody*. Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* appeared on the heels of hooks's volume, and all of the essays in it have been published elsewhere, in some cases decades earlier. While *Feminism Is for Everybody* differs from the other two books in that it is not a reprint, like them it is principally concerned with the history of modern feminist struggle, arguing for its continued relevance in this new era. In other words, each of these texts looks back at the previous two decades of black feminist criticism to consider what it has to offer to contemporary readers and students of feminism. Moreover, each book starts with the presumption that black feminist discourse offers a body of foundational theories and criticism that merits continued and sustained consideration by contemporary readers.

What is it about this cultural moment that warrants the reissuing of these texts, an act that implicitly makes the point that the history of feminism needs to be returned to and rehearsed? Consider that a new generation in the United States has reached adulthood without experiencing or even witnessing the struggles that activist foremothers and their supporters underwent to achieve equal rights in public and private spheres of life. For these young women, struggles for suffrage, equal pay, and

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reproductive rights are the stuff of history books. Mass recognition of the need for continued feminist struggle sometimes seems an unreachable goal, especially among the young. At the same time, paradoxically enough, the institutionalization of feminist discourse, particularly in the academy, has created a vibrant and engaged audience for these works. It is for these complementary reasons, one supposes, that each of the authors revisits the history of black feminist thought, tracing the path it has taken in order to point to where it may be headed.

With the exception of a new preface, the second edition of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* does not differ from the first edition, originally published in 1984. In the preface hooks argues for *Feminist Theory's* importance to feminist discourse because it examines the “interlocking nature of gender, race, and class”—what has come to be known as intersectionality (xii). Moreover, she makes a case for the work's ongoing importance to activists and theorists who continue to address women's multiply layered and intersecting experiences of patriarchal subordination. While it is true that the book remains significant because patriarchal and sexual oppression continue to exist, it must be said that the book does read as a period piece, one that clearly marks itself as being produced during and in response to a particular historical moment.

This aspect of *Feminist Theory* makes its natural setting the classroom, and its readership students of women's histories and feminist theories who would be exposed to hooks's intervention in feminist discourse. The book is a useful resource in that hooks also refers to key texts of modern feminism throughout and includes a bibliography that would supplement students' knowledge of late sixties, seventies, and early eighties feminism. However, one can also imagine a nonacademic audience taking up this book. In this case the book's usefulness would lie in its clear and accessible language, in its central thesis (that white middle-class feminist activists must contend with the fact that their struggles against patriarchal domination could not be sustained until they dealt openly with the class and racial inequalities that strafed the women's movement's own internal politics), and in its historicization of the modern feminist movement.

In contrast, *Feminism Is for Everybody* is more clearly intended for a nonacademic audience, as it lacks all of the scholarly apparatuses that mark its predecessor (bibliography, references, etc.). This slender volume (only 118 pages) gives a brief history of the modern feminist movement and explains its relevance to modern Americans in a format that its author describes as being “easy to read without being simplistic” (viii). Its coverage of these issues is cursory, but it really doesn't pretend to do otherwise. Hooks asserts that she set out to write a handbook for those who

are wary of, or put off by, the idea of feminism: men (she states) and girls and young women (she implies). The result is a work that attempts to persuade and engage initiates to the feminist cause more than it means to educate or inform them comprehensively. For the knowing reader, the value of the book lies in its providing a vocabulary with which to talk about feminism that isn't weighed down by the jargon that can be off-putting to those outside the academy.

*Feminism Is for Everybody's* most persuasive argument is also its simplest and is founded in a definition of feminism that hooks first articulated in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: that it is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1). The usefulness of this definition, hooks argues, lies in its making clear that for feminists sexism is the enemy and not men, and that revolutionary feminist practice combats institutionalized oppression and not individual offense. This definition mounts a potent assault against the reductiveness of "lifestyle feminism," which touts equality—purportedly already achieved by most North American women—as feminism's only aim, and it serves as a challenge to the men and women who express skepticism about the need for continued involvement in any kind of feminist movement. A clearer understanding of what it has meant to fight against sexist oppression, hooks suggests, is a necessary first step toward the revivification of feminist thought and action.

That said, *Feminism Is for Everybody* reads as uncharacteristically nostalgic in its vision of a return to grassroots feminism as the answer to academia's increased institutionalization and corporatization of feminist discourse and action. Traditional feminist activism has been displaced, hooks argues, by a more career-oriented and elitist agenda in which assuming a feminist identity may accomplish little more than to enhance a careerist's professional standing. Feminism, she argues, is a radical practice and not an identity to put on like a coat or dress.

Hooks identifies women's studies departments and classes as the only viable substitutes for the consciousness-raising (CR) groups of the past. But to these one could add cafés and the Internet. She doesn't include them, likely because these other settings encourage a transience and anonymity that would not satisfy hooks's longing for the more traditional settings and interactions of the past. Still, the idea that the reemergence of CR groups will lead to a reinvigorated feminism in which women are encouraged to confront their internalized sexism, racism, and classism doesn't fully take into account the different venues for feminist community formation now available.

Although *Feminism Is for Everybody* challenges its readers to imagine

a feminist politics that maintains its ability to enact social and political change, this challenge is only partially articulated because hooks refuses to engage more deeply with contemporary feminist theories even as she insists on the interdependence of theory and praxis. For example, hooks argues that truly revolutionary thinkers, whose visions of reform were transformative in their attack on patriarchy and sexist oppression, have made little headway into the popular consciousness, which prefers the more easily assimilable rhetoric of “equal pay for equal work.” While hooks’s analysis is characteristically astute, this is also a moment in which the volume falters, for she fails to explicitly take up any agenda elucidated by the “revolutionary thinkers” to whom she refers. Although hooks does mention that progressive feminist theories have been more readily accepted in academic circles than in the mainstream, she fails to mention in detail any other contributions to feminist thought that have emerged in the past decades. And here lies the volume’s greatest loss, for one of hooks’s gifts is her ability to render complex ideas and theories in prose that is lucid and, as her book’s subtitle suggests, passionate. It would have been immensely useful if hooks had attempted to bridge the admittedly large divide—some might say chasm—between the popular readership to whom this book is addressed and the more elitist circles in which many feminist academics run, by devoting more attention to recent theoretical interventions such as critiques of essentialism, the concept of identity as constituted through performance, or global feminism, to name a few.

Finally, in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Jacqueline Bobo paints a portrait of black feminist cultural studies that achieves one version of hooks’s idea of feminist praxis by gathering together essays that are theoretically informed while also being about the everyday. Many of the essayists are, or were, in academia; others, however, are not and include an actor, a filmmaker, and a curator. *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Bobo states in her preface, “emanates from the notion of ‘drylongso,’ that ordinary, everyday women are the unheralded bedrock of Black feminist social, political, and cultural activism” (xv). The emphasis of this anthology, therefore, is on the politics of cultural production more than on the politics of legislative power, which were the primary concerns of second-wave feminism.

The book is organized into five sections, each of which includes three or four essays, a short bibliography of supplemental readings and media resources, and an introductory essay in which Bobo provides an overview of the essays contained within and her rationale for their inclusion in the anthology. The overviews are largely informative and helpful, though I wished Bobo had discussed the implications of black feminist cultural

studies being rooted in a genealogy of black feminist *literary* criticism (the three essays included in “The Foundation” section are all examples of that genre). The sections comprise the foundational texts as well as essays on the moving image, visual art, music and spoken word, and, finally, material culture. The essays and other resources are well organized, making this an excellent volume for use in the classroom. In her overviews Bobo discusses the media resources (videotaped interviews, documentaries, and films) in some depth, which provides the reader with a preliminary model of how to approach the teaching of text in conjunction with film.

Each section does more than pay tribute to the classic essays in the field of black feminist cultural studies. At their best, the different sections provide a historical survey while also revealing the ways that each writer responds to, challenges, and revises the critics who have come before. For example, in “The Foundation” Barbara Smith’s seminal essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” calls for a model of criticism that takes into account the politics of race, class, and sex. Deborah McDowell answers Smith’s challenge with an insistence that careful textual analysis must be combined with analyses of historical and political contexts. Smith and McDowell’s essays are then followed by Barbara Christian’s assessment of the then-current (1989) state of black feminist criticism, which includes a discussion of the arguments of the other two critics. At the anthology’s weakest, a section may gesture toward some thematic unity (e.g., addressing black women’s responses to stereotypical representations of themselves on film), but the effect remains a collection of loosely related analyses of different productions. For example, filmmaker C. A. Griffith asserts that critics (both academic and in the popular press) focus on actors, directors, and the notion of art as ideology but fail to investigate filmmaking’s high degree of collaboration or the highly stratified roles within the industry. This argument functions as an implicit challenge to a critic like Bobo, who in a previous essay examines the multiple ways that Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* had broken with mainstream representations of black women, to expand the scope of analysis. But while the concluding essay in the section—Sheri Park’s analysis of the ways that the television production of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* poses a more radical critique of gendered roles and domesticity than had been possible in the original stage production—is compelling, it seems like a detour from, not an extension of, the ideas the section addresses.

In general, however, Bobo balances with deftness the task of providing a genealogy of black feminist cultural studies and exploring the different questions posed by cultural producers, activists, and theorists working within the field. In doing so, Bobo reveals how black feminists have trans-

formed, and will continue to transform, the ways in which culture is produced, critiqued, and reimagined.

Rather than explore new theoretical territory, or break new conceptual ground, Bobo and hooks focus instead on illuminating the most influential black feminist theory and criticism of the last thirty years. They show how from their particular vantage points black women have contributed a rich body of thought to analyses of the politics of culture, race, gender, class, and sex. As a result, each author contributes to a collective project of feminist canon formation and points toward the future of scholarship by and about black women. ■