what would bell hooks say?

Ms. called the iconoclastic scholar, writer and activist to find out

BY JENNIFER WILLIAMS

In 1981, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism introduced us to bell hooks, a writer who would become one of the 20th century's foremost critical voices on feminism, race, class, culture and sexual politics. Since then, the famously lowercased books has published more than 30 books, ranging from feminist film criticism and studies of black masculinity to essays on teaching and community to works of memoir and poetry.

Her definition of feminism, in Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, as a "movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" equipped feminists with an accessible response for students and naysayers who felt alienated from the "F" word. Agree or disagree with every analysis, we came to rely on books' sharp perceptions of the myriad ways that "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" shapes representations of women, people of color and sexual minorities in American culture.

In the past few years, especially in light of the social changes that have taken place in America's so-called "post-racial" and "post-feminist" culture, we've missed that voice we'd come to depend on to "tell it like it is." So I was thrilled with the opportunity to catch up with bell hooks in her home state of Kentucky, where she is a distinguished professor in residence at Berea College, which launched the bell hooks Institute for Critical Thinking, Contemplation and Dreaming last year.

I talked to her about how to live feminism and not just think it, and got her take on some of the hot button issues of our time.

Ms.: Feminists were used to hearing from you and we've missed you. We even celebrated bell hooks week on the Ms. Blog last fall. Some of our readers felt you had disappeared—did you?

Bell hooks: Not at all. I left New York in part because my parents were aging. I also grew up in Kentucky and wanted to give back to the kind of people who had given a lot to me, so I went to teach at Berea College, which is a needs-based college. None of our students pay tuition. I wanted them to see what Kentucky can bring. You can be cosmopolitan and be a country girl from Kentucky.

In the past few years both my mom and dad have died, so I accomplished what I wanted to do—spend time with them while they were still well and be with them in their dying process.

Ms.: I'm sorry to hear about your parents. How did that experience and the return home influence the direction of your work?

Bell hooks: I wrote a book called Belonging: A Culture of Place, which came out about a year ago, about organic farming, black people and sustainability, and eco-feminism. Those are big issues in Appalachia. I feel like what's happening with people in Appalachia is what's going to happen with everybody in the United States—food shortages, lots of people growing their own food.

I also just finished a big essay on Simone de Beauvoir and her influence on my thinking.

Ms.: In what ways did you feel her influence?

Bell hooks: I came upon Simone de Beauvoir as a late teen and thought, This is it. This woman is an intellectual. I want to be an intellectual. She is going to be the person that I follow.

My dad had always said if you're too educated you're not going to have partnerships, and her long-term love relationship with Sartre inspired me and so many other young
women in the late '60s/early '70s. Of course we found out that the romance wasn't all that we thought it was. It was very conventional in some ways, but still she was a great inspiration to me.

Ms.: And you serve that role for a lot of us, myself included.
bell hooks: Hallelujah!

Ms.: With my generation of feminists—I'm 39—do you think there's been a failure to carry the torch?
bell hooks: I wouldn't say there's a failure. It's much harder for young women today to practice feminism because so much is expected of you all. And you really see, if you watch television, that you're expected to be slim and beautiful, smart and the equals of men, but to subordinate yourselves to men whenever that's appropriate for getting ahead. So many mixed messages leave a lot of young women feeling depressed—not in feminist practice but not subjugated either. More like lost. It's our responsibility as feminist thinkers and advocates to share more of how to live in the world.

Gloria Steinem and I had a conversation recently at Berea with around 20 women from the college and community. People want to know how to live in this world as feminists, not just how to think feminism. When I walk out my door and some redneck white old man calls me "doll baby," how do I deal with that? I deal with it by recognizing in the scheme of what people are enduring in the world, if all I have to address in that moment is a man calling me "doll baby," I don't have to freak out about that because I'm an advocate of feminist politics.

And women who are heterosexual want to know how to have partnerships with men. I meet a lot more young men who advocate feminism than ever before, but they're often not the men that young women desire.

Ms.: So clearly there need to be more conversations taking place across generations as well as across genders.
bell hooks: I agree. One of the negatives of the whole idea of the “First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave” is that it divided people off from one another, rather than recognizing that if we're talking about feminism as a political movement to end domination, to end sexism and sexist oppression, then we're not talking about categories. We're just talking about politics. How do we advocate feminist politics in such a way that it permeates every aspect of our lives, of our government, of religion? One of the worst things to happen to feminism is that people perceive it as a lifestyle that some people choose and not a politics.

Ms.: I noticed that you've appeared on Twitter. Is social media a useful tool to reach across generations?
bell hooks: I've been a person who doesn't use the Internet or have a cell phone, and it's because of young feminists, men and women, because of their demand for my work, that I've come more into technology. All media can be used to educate for critical consciousness. A lot of people don't realize that before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. was already warning us about the danger of being too enamored of new technologies and not using them for social justice.

The challenge is especially true for people in their 20s, because the media have kind of forgotten people in my generation. It's not trying to seduce us, but it has a powerful effect on young people's ethics and values. A lot of media says, to young women especially, that anything goes.

Ms.: I also noticed that you've been tweeting about love.
bell hooks: I'm still obsessed with love. I really believe that love as a political transformative force in our society can change the world. It's been love that motivates people to the most deep and profound change. In fact, I was thinking about doing a short book about this whole journey, going around the country and talking to people about love. So many bell hooks' readers [were] upset that I was writing about love—it was like "bell's gone soft," and I kept thinking, They don't get it. It's not about going soft at all; it's about knowing what can save our planet. Which is people connecting, communicating, showing loving-kindness.

Ms.: A woman who talks about love is still suspect.
bell hooks: Oh definitely. I always tease people that if Cornel West had started talking about how we need to go back to love, people would say, "Oh gosh, he's just a genius. That's brilliant." But when I talk about love people say, "Oh, she's gone soft; it's trivial." And that's really sad because to speak of love as a force against domination is just such a powerful call.

Ms.: There are so many hot-button issues I'd like to get your thoughts on. So let's do a kind of "what would bell hooks say?"
talkback. To start, what do you think about the revolutions in Africa and the Middle East, and women's roles in those uprisings?

bell hooks: It is vital that so many of these movements have been called forth and women are active in them, because a resurgence of patriarchal domination is part of why the resistance on the part of women in many cultures has gotten greater. Women are being wrongly blamed for a lot of social ills.

Ms.: OK, how do you feel about gay marriage?

bell hooks: I think marriage in general is not a healthy institution in our society. If people want civil rights, then that's what I feel we should be fighting for. Couples, people who are each other's kin or primary intimacies, a friend who takes care of a friend for 30 years in the same household—all should have basic civil rights. To bring that whole movement for social justice under the rubric of "gay marriage" seems to me just to reinforce patriarchal notions of who is worthy of care and support. It also lets down the gay people who don't want to be married.

The movement for gay marriage has had a strong push among very class-privileged people, because they are the people with trusts and with property and with health care. If you're gay, black, poor and you don't have any access to insurance, the question of whether your partner can be included on your insurance is just not relevant to the health needs of your life. What would be more relevant is national health care!

Ms.: While we're on health and medical issues, what do you think about the recent attack on women's reproductive rights?

bell hooks: On one hand we're being told that feminism failed, but if it failed why do people want to go back and take away some basic successes of the movement? I think it's because having choice empowers women who have unwanted pregnancies. There's no way we can surrender the struggle to maintain reproductive rights because it's so tied to the future of what females of all ages can do. I think we forget about the level of bondage many women felt prior to birth control, prior to so many reproductive freedoms, of just feeling like your body was an agent of your destruction.

Reproductive rights are also tied to women having sexual self-esteem. I look at Sex and the City and I think about how much damage is done by a film like that which trivializes women's efforts to be sexually self-actualized and free, and makes it a parody of the worst kind of patriarchal pornographic sexuality.

Ms.: Speaking of women's sexuality and popular culture, what do you think about Lady Gaga?

bell hooks: Lady Gaga to me is emblematic of the normalization of patriarchal pornography in our culture. Lady Gaga made how many millions—$20-some million or even more last year? It reinforces the idea that the avenue through which a young woman can really make the bucks is through a kind of sexual resubjugation via pornographic representation. I don't know any women who see Lady Gaga as a figure of liberation, but she is a figure of fame, celebrity, money.

Fame is fun, money is useful, celebrity can be exciting, but finally life is about optimal well-being and how we achieve that in a dominator culture, in a greedy culture, in a culture that uses so much of the world's resources. How do men and women, girls and boys, live lives of compassion, justice, love? And I think that's the visionary challenge for feminism and all other progressive movements for social change.

Ms.: Have we gotten it? Where is feminism today?

bell hooks: Overall, the theory and practice of feminism can transform your life in so many positive ways, starting with calling forth healthy self-esteem and self-love. Feminism offers young women and men incredible tools that can allow them to live well in an unwell society. Many of us over-50 women who've found our lives so enhanced and our capacity to love, to think, to act so fueled by feminist thinking and practice stand by and watch young people think this is a worthless movement. And it's sad because it's been part of the energizing catalyst for us to have incredible lives.

Gloria Steinem and I were on the cover of Ms. magazine some years ago with Urvashi Vaid and Naomi Wolf, and we look back on that and think about where our lives are now, that we've all just grown more powerful, stronger and even richer. I just want young Ms. readers to know that power and that joy, the joy in struggle.

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