



i am the other

by kelly woods

"Things are pretty much equal for blacks and whites now in America." I sat astonished by those words. I was in a classroom much like those found on college campuses all across this country; one engaged in conversation, a free sharing of ideas and thoughts. These rooms are assumed to be filled with intellectuals in progress; minds open and willing to learn. Rarely does one expect these classrooms to be exuding with ignorance. But in that moment I realized I was in the latter. There was as much racially ignorant thought here in Hilo as there was in any town in the Deep South. In that moment the ignorance was intolerable for me, my hands shook as did my voice as my anger bubbled up inside me and I tried to defend my place as the *other*. Eyes of white faces were all suddenly focused upon me, the lone black girl in the class was about to speak and the weight of bell hooks lay on my plate to explain. In that moment, my assumed assignment expanded itself to so much more than merely reading an article by bell hooks and discussing it; it became a study of America's modern day race relations.

bell hooks, a product of quite tempestuous times in American history, is now a renowned African-American scholar whose works severely divide audiences in their opinion of her. She is as highly revered as she is attacked for her views of race and feminism, and so was the case for this particular discussion. hooks' commonly used phrase, "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" is surely where many draw the line against her ideas. Primarily it is those who are privileged and in positions of power in society that are often offended by her four powerful and carefully chosen words. It is from this phrase that the racial tensions between the *other* and "non-other" members of society emerge. hooks' ploy here is quite useful. Her ability to so easily conjure up emotions by using this phrase simply shows the amount to which racial ignorance and its displays are still dividing our society into two quite distinct groups.

In the 1960's, society was more visually divided into black and white. And while most of these physical separations have dissipated, the oppressive constructs of society still continue to hold quite

strongly. It is this lack of physical barriers that often blinds the "non-others" to the painfully strong boundaries that still do exist. Nowadays, "overt racist discrimination is not as fashionable as it once was and that is why everyone can pretend racism does not exist" (killing rage 5). Our country all too often promotes a Political Correctness that does not condone discrimination but that also does nothing to change the current racial tensions that do exist. These ignored issues that are swept under the rug are then assumed to have been solved. This lack of addressing and dealing with racism in general society is then mirrored in the higher education institutions. And even as the demographics of today's colleges continue to transform into more racially diverse communities, they still remain a predominantly White forum that harbors societal ideas of a blatantly dangerous ignoring of racial problems.

One such setting of this is Colby College, a small campus in Waterville, Maine. This school's website represents itself as being dedicated to "engaged persons prepared to respond to the challenges of an increasingly diverse and global society and to the issues of justice that arise therein" ("Colby"). However, in 1999 a white male student wrote an editorial in response to increased police patrolling of campus parking meters. The student suggested the police could better spend their time fighting *real* crime, like that found in Compton. His editorial then compared the small town of Waterville to that of Compton. In this comparison Waterville was personified as being full of law abiding White citizens whereas Compton was portrayed stereotypically as full of crime committing, Jeri-curl wearing Blacks. After African-Americans students on campus took clear offense to his editorial, he wrote a defensive response in which he said that when writing his article he "wasn't thinking about race, [he] was thinking about Jeri-Curls" (Gordon 421). Jeri-curls? I am bewildered. This student's attempt to claim artistic license in his works then allows many to overlook the underlying racist thought and ideas that are presented in the work and regard them as merely satirical. While brushing off these transparently obvious racist statements as jokes, the overall seriousness of the African-American struggle not only gets severely demeaned but is being redefined by the very group of oppressors that have created the struggle. Gordon notes this fact by stating that "the white monopoly, by having the privilege to name the problem... also

determine de facto what the problem is not" (422). In these situations, the oppressors have the power to change and dismiss what they will.

These incidents are also increasingly becoming more than just a dichotomous Black and White problem. Racists are becoming equal opportunity offenders. On the larger campus of Washington State University, we encounter yet another blatant display. Beginning in the fall 2004 semester, two white male basketball players began harassing Asian-American female students while they worked at the Multicultural Center. Acts reported to the police stated that the two males were "mimicking her as if she was a monkey; [they] made a motion to indicate that Kim [one of the accusers] had chinky eyes, and commenting, Asians take all the jobs." (Matsudaira). Despite these accounts that included other eye-witnesses, police found no criminal activities had taken place and the University conduct board found that no harassing behaviors had taken place either. When asked about the accusations, the two students could only recall one attention grabbing incident in which they were dancing in front of the center. They claimed that it was a dance from the movie *Dumb and Dumber*, "however, the complainant and at least one other witness perceived this same dance as a racially motivated 'minstrel' dance" (Tinney/Streng). Again, the acts of racism are quickly excused by declaring them a joke. Gordon and Johnson note that it is not likely that these racially discriminated communities "will find hope in the law, at least not without significant changes in its structures and practice" (417). By having control over the law, oppressors again are able to redefine these compromising situations so as to not confront or condemn the actions of anyone who is a part of their inclusive privileged group.

The lapse of time since the Civil Rights movement also seems to pose a problem for many. Unlike other movements, time has not held the promise and success for racial equality; instead, time has allowed for the morphing of a new generation of racists. A form whose underlying ideas are the very ones that were being challenged during the Civil Rights Movement. In the book *Living with Racism*, authors Feagin and Sikes note that most white Americans "look at serious racism as the prejudices and actions of extreme bigots not considered to be representative of the white majority" (3). The ability to distance oneself from these serious issues is an ignorant luxury that I, hooks, and those who share our voice do not have. Instead these distant memories for today's White America are the ever present realities of the lives of the *other*. If you are distinguished as *other* then

you will sadly encounter these forms of belittlement in your lifetime. It is in these first hand experiences that one cannot deny the presence of racism today. These all too common events are the very ones that hooks so poignantly explores and utilizes in her writings.

But the validity of hooks' writings are still questioned, as they were in our classroom. One peer wondered what place hooks' argument had among scholars like Chomsky, Burke and others, who through no coincidence all happen to be white males. The validity of their work was not heavily questioned, for they fit the description of those who sit atop our culture's power structures. hooks courageously forces us to step outside the boundaries setup by her white counterparts. Her compelling experiences are so eloquently put that they empower the people who share her voice- like me! By doing this, hooks' writings attempt to adjust the imbalances of power not only within her field but in the unfair structures of society as well. While most of my peers were up in arms, hooks' place seemed quite exact to me- to part the sea of white rhetors and create a place for the all too forgotten *other*. Her words build a platform on which we can stand and proclaim that the realm of academia should be open to and take seriously the words and actions of the *other*. This platform hopes to create an open forum for people whose voices are not normally represented in the words of her more welcomed colleagues.

The American hegemony surely makes a contribution to how these rhetorical exchanges are read. Although hooks would surely disapprove of the way she may have been presented as the lone *other*, she is a one of a kind writer in the field of rhetoric. It may have been easy for my peers to question her merely because her voice was so different from her contemporaries. One student claimed that it was "the blatant crudeness of [hooks'] writing and her somewhat militant feminist assumptions that didn't sit right with me" (Hunter). Though each theorist had made assumptions, only hooks' were deemed as such. hooks' works contain as much sophisticated information as her male white contemporaries, but I feel that it is not as widely accepted because it doesn't capture the idealized nature of what White-America sees as a happily ever after, it is instead completely raw much like the country's racist situations. And with the privileged behind the forces of the hegemony, I would not deny that this situation may be quite purposefully set up in this way as to have hooks misconstrued. But what the hegemony has yet to take into account are the people like me, who in many situations sit as the lone example. The *other* that

hooks so powerfully connects with and empowers acts as a counter to some of the resistance that has come up against her works.

The acknowledgment of racism today is particularly tough to discuss, for it is so deeply woven into the history of America. The very institutions that are created to encourage thinking and change are built upon and continue to maintain racial privileges. So how can we change these restraints? hooks and writers like her are surely a great first step toward educating the ever present ignorance that taints this country. One peer asked how she was to know what the Black experience was, if she was not part of the *other*? And as I collected my anger my voice emerged and revealed that stories of these very powerful experiences are all around us and many of these snapshots are captured quite vividly in the pages of works that hooks has created for all of us. She says, "after all if we pretend racism does not exist, that we do not know what it is or how to change it- it never has to go away" ("talking back" 4). Her words have created a passion in me that burns ever brightly. This powerful flame houses a zeal that will no longer sit quietly. I am the voice of the *other* and it would be wise for America to listen.

[Note to the reader: bell hooks has chosen to denote her name in the lowercase; it is therefore purposefully shown in this way in my work. These are not typos. The same applies to the chosen lowercase for the author's name.]

WORKS CITED

- Colby College. 30 Apr. 2005. Colby College. <<http://www.colby.edu>>
- Feagin, Joe. "Race and its continuing significance on our campuses." *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 19 (2003): 24 -28.
- Feagin, Joe and Sikes, Melvin. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Gordon, Jill and Markus Johnson. "Race, Speech and a Hostile Education Environment: What Color is Free Speech?" *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 34 (2003): 414-436.
- hooks, bell. *Killing Rage*. New York: Holt, 1995.
- . *Talking Back: thinking feminist - thinking black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.
- Hunter, Katherine. "bell hooks & 'eating the other'." Online posting. 22 Mar. 2005.
- Matsudaira, Vince. "WSU Student Conduct Officers Clear Basketball Players of Racial Harassment Allegations." *The North American Post* 1 May 2005 <<http://www.napost.com/news/community/march/mar9/wsuh.html>>
- Tinney, James and Robert Strenge. "WSU Students Found Not in Violation of University Conduct Provisions." *Washington State University News* 2 March 2005. 1 May 2005 <<http://wsunews.wsu.edu/detail.asp?storyId=5080>>