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Race, Gender, Humility and Humanity: An Analysis of Blackness through bell hooks' Words

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PROJECT PASSIONS

Online interview with Professor Megan Feifer,
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How can we live in a world devastated by
Ecological disaster?
Water-resistant plasters cannot fix the
Bloody scar
We still provoke to our mother earth.
How can we live in a world entangled in
Unresolved humanitarian problems,
Where generations still try to handle
Discrimination, racism and violence?

Why aren't we able to collaborate
And not hate
Those with whom we partake
This place?
Why do we discriminate hate
Using the word race instead of
Culture?

We classify people according to their external
Features.
We rank humans
Based on their social conditions,
On language,
Color, traditions.

Costumes, disappearance, collusion,
Everything is a confusion
Which can't be explained
Without pain.

Helpless people asking for food
Demanding shelter, cures, a roof
While others living in luxury, working in factories,
Complaining about their unsatisfactory life
Without taking action for those who really die.

We are supposed to live in the same world
In connection,
Perfection
But since the beginning
We have moved towards the skinning
Of our inmost soul.
A complete misunderstanding:
Melancholy of a daydreamed brotherhood more and more hard
And demanding.

In fear
We disappear
Still unable to
Love.

Beatrice Colina

To the future generations.
To the change.

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Introduction

Today, we are struggling worldwide for our rights, whether they are related to sexual orientation, women's rights, or life-decision rights. We are trying to soften the obsolete ideologies and beliefs in order to adapt this world to our new necessities: the road to freedom always needs new pioneers. Now, let's go back in time and stop the timeline between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, during the Atlantic slave trade and the commerce of black slaves. Even though many aspects have changed over the centuries, what unfortunately has remained the same in the United States is racism and sexism. I would like to analyze the travel from Africa to America and the conditions that black men and women were forced to endure. The exploitation of black people begun before their arrival in the United States. In fact, the Middle Passage was the first step of dehumanization of black people: the first mark of white possession over blacks was a brand made with hot iron once they arrived on the slave ship. By doing so, their bodies and their lives did not belong to them anymore, but became private property of the whites. On board, they were removed their names and their identities, they were obliged to live in terrible conditions, and were reduced to mere cattle, ready to disembark on what was

supposed to be the new “promised land” (a soil that would be stained with their sweat and blood). The Middle Passage can be considered the first step of black people’s dehumanization. This historical moment is responsible for black people’s destruction of identity and human dignity, with the abandonment of their culture, roots and heritage. The ruling reign of terror that black men and women experienced during the ship trade was psychologically damaging for the relationship with their identity and it was the beginning of men’s eradication of masculinity.

Starting from bell hooks’ analysis of black women and men in the American society in *Belonging, a Culture of Place*, *Ain’t I a Woman*, *Black Looks – Race and Representation*, and *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center,* the intent of this interview is to retrace the story of black people in the United Stated, in order to contribute to the eradication of racism, sexism and the fear of the Other.

bell hooks

bell hooks (née Gloria Jean Watkins) was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in 1952 […] hooks grew up between the hills and a segregated town. Her early schooling presented Kentucky as race-neutral, neither poor anti-slavery […]. In 2018, the Carnegie Center inducted hooks into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame, recognizing her lifelong contributions to literature and justice.

bell hooks' impact stretches beyond her Kentucky roots. The little girl whose grandmother was nicknamed "Glory" is now heralded as one of the preeminent feminist voices of our time. In 1995, Utne Reader recognized her among its "100 Visionaries Who Can Change Your Life." TIME honored her in 2020 with its "100 Women of the Year," dubbing hooks a "rare rock star of a public intellectual."

With more than 30 books to her name and articles in magazines like *Ms.*, *Essence* and *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, hooks commands attention. Her writing blends social commentary and autobiography with feminist critique, and no matter the topic, she delivers scholarly rigor in everyday prose.

Before relocating to Berea, hooks taught at institutions such as Stanford, Yale and The City College of New York. She has held residencies in the United States and overseas, and in 2014, St. Norbert College hosted "A Year of bell hooks" in her honor.

Following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 and nationwide racial justice protests, hooks' *All About Love: New Visions* became sought-after reading. Readers continue to turn to hooks for a clear perspective on how we can move towards justice and love.[1]

[1] https://www.berea.edu/bhc/about-bell/

Megan Feifer

Megan Feifer (she/her/hers) is a Teacher-Scholar in Residence at the bell hooks center at Berea College. She earned her B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin and a Ph.D. in Literary Studies with a minor in Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies from Louisiana State University in 2018. Her research and teaching interests focus on the counter-narratives and counter-archives contemporary Afro-diasporic writers produce in response to what Anne McClintock terms the "official ghosting," or inability/unwillingness of nations to confront and account for the "past." She is coeditor of a volume titled *Narrating, History, Home, and Dyaspora: Critical Essays on Edwidge Danticat*, forthcoming from University Press of Mississippi, and author of the article, *The Remembering of Bones: Working Through Trauma and the Counter-Archive in Edwidge Danticat's Farming of Bones*. Both her pedagogy and research center on hooks' critical examination of trans-border systems of domination. During her tenure at the bell hooks center, she will work to foster sustained critical attention to hooks' Love and Teaching Trilogies.[2]

[2] https://www.berea.edu/wgs/faculty-and-staff/megan-feifer/

Berea College

Berea College was founded in 1858 by a visionary abolitionist who believed in freedom for everyone, women and men. It was named after a biblical town in the New Testament "where people received the word with all readiness of mind." Fee founded Berea College with the expressed purpose of educating men and women, black and white from the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, especially poor folk. He wanted them to be able to learn in an environment embodying the principles of freedom, justice, and equality. He was committed to the creation of a lasing culture of belonging. It is fitting that I choose to create home in this place, to be part of a community working to sustain a culture of belong. Berea offers much that was wondrous in my life as a child.[3]

[3] bell hooks, *Belonging, A Culture of Place*. [1990]. Routledge. 2009.

I. Racism, Sexism and Oppression during Slavery in the United States

The issue of sexism (sexist oppression) and racism go together if we think about the condition of black women from slavery to the present day. Institutionalized sexism, which results in patriarchy, has affected the life of African-American women who, since their arrival in the United Stated, have been victims of exploitation. At the time of the Middle Passage, slave ships were a constant reminder of black women's sexual vulnerability: white slaveowner stripped and beat them; rape was a common method of torture used to undermine them and psychologically damage black men's masculinity. Along with it was the demoralizing treatment of children during the trade, other than their exposure at the dehumanizing condition of their mothers. Women who were pregnant struggled to survive in terrible conditions, or eventually died while giving birth. As bell hooks writes in *Ain't I a Woman*: "The traumatic experience of African women and men aboard slave ships were only the initial stages of an indoctrination process that would transform the African free human being into a slave".[4] Once on land, the body of black women was used as a sexual tool both by black and white men. Breeding, in fact, is a form of

[4] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*. [1981]. Pluto Press, 1990, p. 19.

exploitation. White slaveowners exploited the body of black women for pleasure, while black men were obliged to entertain sexual relations with black women in order to give birth to those who would become the new slaves. The black woman's body was used as a machine for reproduction; white slaveowner claimed even more workforce and if black women were not able to bear many children consecutively, they were flogged and punished. The condition of black women was sorrowful: while pregnant, they still had to overwork, sometimes undernourished, and the precarious conditions in which they lived, together with the repeated pregnancies, led to numerous miscarriages and deaths. Therefore, black women were basically used as sexual objects for lust and procreation, as well as a working force for the white household and plantations. As a consequence, they were deprived of their identities, they were called slaves and prostitutes, they were tortured, insulted and annihilated to death. Now, I would like to ask you if the women's treatment during slavery and white male's rape still have an impact on the minds of black women today. Do black women still fear white men as sex offenders? And, can the identity of black women be influenced by the sense of invisibility and objectification experienced by their ancestors?

Professor Feifer:

This is a really tough question to answer. Unfortunately, when we talk about this particular history, we fail to look at a sort of resistance and experience of fugitivity. As I was reading last night, I was thinking of a work which would be helpful to

deeper analyze this topic: Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. In particular, if we think about bell hooks, she would answer "absolutely" to the question related to fear. I don't want to be wrong here, but bell hooks wrote a piece where she describes that it is late at night and there is a white man at her door. Her mind immediately goes to a fear of rape, a fear of violation, a fear of exploitation, but eventually, it turns out that he is a FedEx man. The fact that she is speaking of this sort of experience, this sort of lineage of rape and exploitation, makes me think that this fear is real. I don't feel it is my place to talk about black women's identities from my own positionality, but I can speak from bell hooks' work. As a consequence, this makes me think of her overarching terms "white supremacist", "imperialists", "capitalist", "patriarchy", she revised in conversations with Laverne Cox at the New School. I think she would say that this topic is very relevant.

With regard to this troublesome situation, we cannot but consider the exploitation of black men during slavery, since it led to the issue of emasculation and metaphorical castration. In *White Hero, Black Beast*, Paul Hock writes: "The concept of masculinity is dependent at its very root on the concepts of sexual repression and private property. Ironically, it is sexual repression and economic scarcity that give masculinity its main significance as a symbol of

economic status and sexual opportunity."[5] During slavery and so far, black men have been emasculated for many reasons; their sense of "dominance" was fractured because of the impossibility of showing strength, virility, vigor and physical prowess: in slave ships, they were crowded like cattle intended for slaughter, with women and children, half-naked, ill, among dirt, hunger and deterioration. This metaphorical castration had a great impact for what will be the relationship between the two sexes and the two races in the American territory in the following centuries. Furthermore, what reinforced emasculation during slavery was the abuse of black women by white slaveowners, and the inability of black men to provide sustenance for their family. Black women were exploited in the fields and in the household: they worked in plantations, gave birth to their children, and they were even supposed to perform a variety of tasks in the white domestic household. Moreover, women appropriated male jobs or worked under the same conditions of their husbands. On the one hand, black male slaves were exploited in the fields, but on the other hand, black females were exploited in the fields, in the domestic household, they were mothers and even white men's objects of sexual assault. Because of that, black males' frustration was the principal cause for their emasculation. Their sense of inferiority compared to the white male and the sexual abuse and work exploitation of their women enhanced their

[5] bell hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*. [1992]. South End Press, 1992. P. 94.

sense of repression, which needed a ploy to appease: patriarchism. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes: "Scholars have argued further that by not allowing black men to assume their traditional patriarchal status, white men effectively emasculated them, reducing them to an effeminate state."[6] How were male and female's roles inverted in the American colonial society? Were black males sexually exploited by white women, or where they considered impure at their eyes?

Professor Feifer:

I think the larger issue you are speaking to is humanism and the dehumanization that the system of chattel slavery and colonization and imperialism has structured. I think that, when bell hooks talks about emasculation she tries to untangle what is so fundamentally problematic about patriarchy itself and the (de)construction of it. I know that there is a lot of work of black feminists writing in the seventies about the trope of black women emasculating black men, and I think that bell hooks is really speaking to that and saying that this sort of system – first of dehumanization and then this narrative of humanizing – is problematic for many reasons. I personally think that its lineage is this notion of patriarchy and masculinity that bell hooks aimed to connect. Then, bell hooks' quote makes me think about the studies I am doing this summer while digitizing bell hooks' paper and artifacts she gifted at Berea College. The team I am working with, we often talk about critical interventions that are

[6] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 20.

needed in bell hooks' works and this sort of fear to take her on, because she is a prolific writer and thinker. We have discussed about transphobia and some definite reliance on the binary, and my team and I talked a lot about that. The quote "[…] reducing them to an effeminate state" could be really unpacked. I try to remind my team that she is writing from a specific experience, in a specific positionality and generation, and she is speaking back a lot at this point in time. But I think using terms like "effeminate" can be problematic. She is making a very important critical argument about dehumanization as a whole, and its connection to patriarchy and masculinity and those constructs, but also heavily reliant on the binary, which feels like topsy-turvy.

Regarding the second question, there is a lot of historical artifacts about the white gazes inherently phallic. The way white supremacist culture consumes certain forms of blackness, in terms of exploitation and sexuality, was very real and palpable even in non-binary and trans context, both at that time and still today.

II. Patriarchy and masculinity in the Contemporary American Society

Today, the sense of "castration" that men can feel is also attributed to the role they occupy in the family. Since the 20th century "black women were told that they had overstepped the bounds of femininity because they worked outside the home to provide economic support for their families and that by doing so they had de-masculinized black men. Black men were told that they were weak, effeminate, and castrated because "their" women were laboring at menial jobs".[7] Black men were supposed to be emasculated because they were not able to assume a patriarchal role and be a guide for their family. At this purpose, black men in the past were destined to work in dirty places and do what white men did not want to. Moreover, they were underpaid and because of that they needed their wives to give an economic contribution to the family subsistence. Nowadays, at what extent are black men willing to accept jobs with little monetary reward? How do their Graduate studies influence their job and life choices? Can we say that jobs in the United States are still "classed", based on racial prejudices? And, how much is the role of job related to men's masculinity even today?

[7] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 75.

Professor Feifer:

Now we are thinking about capitalism and its relationship to race, gender and sexuality. What I love so much about bell hooks' works is her use of an expansive language and framework to think about systems of domination. Yes, yes and yes. I would be really tentative to say that there is a willingness to accept the fact that there are systems and places that enforce and maintain racialized cast systems in this country. I even think that Covid-19 has really exacerbated that. There is a lot in the news about Americans leaving their jobs. And therefore, I asked myself what Americans. Are we talking about privileged white middle class Americans who are leaving their jobs? Because what we saw with service workers is that they are predominantly folks of color, who are permanently displaced in that sort of working status. Yes, I think that jobs in the United States are definitely still classed. And I often talk about this with my students; I understand my white-skin privileges in this sort of oscillating relationship between privileges and oppression in my life, but I still come from a poor background, and I have witnessed how that functions in the lives of folks of color and often immigrant communities. I believe we still have many marginalized voices and experiences in the United States.

What I like of your question is that jobs are classed, raced and gendered, based on sexuality and now, as we really push against binary and non-binary folks, it is interesting to see what continues to happen in terms of jobs. In the United States we have this "progressive social media" which wants to show

that in the metropolis life is easy and cheery, but in reality, oppression exists everywhere.

Related to the concept of patriarchy and masculinity, in *Black Looks, Race and Representation* bell hooks writes: "In traditional black communities when one tells a grown male to "be a man," one is urging him to a masculine identity rooted in the patriarchal ideal".[8] This implies that masculinity is a homogeneous concept based on the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In addition, in *Ain't I a Woman,* bell hooks adds: "patriarchal power, the power men use to dominate women, is not just the privilege of upper- and middle-class white men, but the privilege of all men in our society regardless their class or race."[9] The condition of black women in our contemporary society has not been completely freed. In fact, the vicious circle considers that black men are victims of racism by white men and therefore, they act as sexist oppressors against black women. This does not allow black women to feel completely free and safe. At this purpose, bell hooks affirms: "Much of the violence against women in this culture is promoted by the capitalist patriarchy that encourages men to see themselves as privileged while daily stripping them of their humanity in dehumanizing work,

[8] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, p. 87-88.
[9] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 87.

and as a consequence man use violence against women to restore their lost sense of power and masculinity."[10]

Do you believe that black people who are most worried about emasculation and castration are those who have completely absorbed white supremacist patriarchal definitions of masculinity? A patriarchal vision of life and family needs a man who is in control of "his" house, "his" wife and "his" children. In your opinion, has capitalism fostered the idea of oppression caused by patriarchism? And, do you think that men who affirm to be in control of "their" women are freer than women, or they are just slaves to their ephemeral idea of power? Every time women complain about feeling undermined by men, do they really live a relationship based on possession? Is male's ownership of women a mere abstract concept related to the male ego or is it a real situation, where women really feel as a male appendix and are treated as objects with no human value or worth? In this case, how important is the impact of our contemporary sexist culture in the shaping of the female role in our society?

Professor Feifer:

What is so revelatory and radical in bell hooks' writings is that she is talking about how capitalist patriarchy impacts all of us. Because that is designed to instruct and be constructed by all of us. And so, we all have the work of unlearning this. I think that what your questions are getting out of it, is how does

[10] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 105-106.

this manifest differently in different communities. I think I cannot definitively answer some of these initial questions because I want to think in terms of communities through bell hooks' words, but also, I want to think about an individual community resistance. Therefore, what I was saying is that masculinity – and when I am saying masculinity is always through the lenses of white supremacy and capitalism – is a damaging and violent construct. If I think about what is "masculine", I just see that it is really sad, damaging and it lacks of complexity. In this case, bell hooks' work really connects with the work of Paulo Freire about the oppressor and the oppressed. If we take in consideration the violence of the oppressor, we cannot but compare it to the psychological, spiritual, emotional and physical manifestation of these institutions on men. In our society, the definition of masculinity is tight and limiting.

We can say that the definition of masculinity and femininity is rooted in our culture, both American and European. Here in Italy, I have experienced the burden of masculinity that little children already have to carry because they are bombarded with images and ideas of what is male and what is female; toys for boys and toys for girls, sports for boys and sports for girls, colors for boys and colors for girls, and so forth. Both boys and girls are conferred fixed roles, which are embedded with prejudice and stereotypes and, as a consequence, they start to behave

and –even worse – think in a prefixed and standardized way from a very young age. I believe that behaving in an imposed "male" or "female" way is risky.

Professor Feifer:

It is fascinating to see the development of the neuroscience's theories around children. I believe that all these studies have revealed the violence that happens when you tell little boys "don't cry". This affects the way children deal with their emotions and the impulses which are sent to their brain. It is fascinating to me that we continue to perpetuate these behaviors even more and more evidence is coming out. bell hooks speaks a lot of truths which are deeply uncomfortable, and one of those is violence within family and violence within black families, particularly around children. She says that there cannot be violence in love. There is no love if violence is present. She condemns the idea of beating children, which in some culture and places is the norm. But we have to remember that bell hooks is a black woman writing about blackness in the United States, which is very precarious, because the audience is both white supremacist and black.

III. Reaction Against Racism and the American Dream

1960s were the years of reaction against racism. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes: "While the 60s power movement was a reaction against racism, it was also a movement that allowed black men to overtly announce their support of patriarchy. Militant black men were publicly attacking the white male patriarchs for their racism but they were also establishing a bond of solidarity with them based on the shared acceptance of and commitment to patriarchy."[11] In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks also writes: "Through American history white men have deliberately promoted hostility and divisiveness between white and black women. The white patriarchal power structure pits the two groups against each other, preventing the growth of solidarity between women and ensuring that woman's status as a subordinate group under patriarchy remains intact".[12] And, "Today, feminism offers women not liberation but the right to act as surrogate men […] Although women in the U.S. have come closer to obtaining social equality with men, the capitalist patriarchal system is unchanged. It is still imperialist, racist, sexist and oppressive."[13]

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[11] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 98-99.
[12] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 155.
[13] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 192.

How is the relationship between black and white men today in America? How do black men feel threatened by white masculinity and patriarchy?

Professor Feifer:

Any feminism that is working towards equality is not doing anything in terms of liberation. When bell hooks says "It is still imperialist, racist, sexist and oppressive", this means that it still maintains the same structure of power. This framework of liberation is her major criticism of the feminist movement. I think that her being really critical and saying that these structures still exist, that they still continue to put people against people, I think that she would go further and talk about the ways in which marginalized communities are put against one another, strategically as well. If we think of movements, right now, like Black Lives Matter or people who are looking to figures like bell hooks, Joy James, who struggle for liberation and abolitionism, we can see people pushing for solidarity among indigenous, Queer, and immigrants communities. And in this way, we come back to bell's solid argument, that we cannot have liberation or freedom without the elimination of all of these "-*isms*". We cannot say that a group is more oppressed than another, because oppression is all oppression, and we have to eliminate it.

And violence is all violence.

Working on education in the deep South as a white person before earning my P.h.D., I tried to push this argument, but there is a strong hold on identity politics in the country, and I think

that there is good and bad and a sort of limitation in terms of ability to see how oppression is connected or how eliminating homophobia directly contributes to eliminating racism in the country.

At this point, do we consider the American Dream as a "masculine dream of dominance and success", as bell hooks writes in *Ain't I a Woman,* or can even women, regardless the color of their skin, chase their American Dream? What is a dream but a pursuit of freedom?

Professor Feifer:

Oh, the American Dream! This is complicated. I think it is this sort of narrative, a pursuit that is deeply embedded in white supremacist, federal, capitalist patriarchy. It is inescapable. And I think it is the machine that pressures us, even though it is very strategically unattainable for the majority of us. And so, I think when you are saying here "it's a dream of dominance and success" it is the great imperialist and colonial endeavor. Can people pursue it, and do they? Yes. I think it is complicated, I want to give people more credit, but it is like a machine that forces you to do that, or feel like a failure if you cannot accomplish it. But it does not consider marginality and oppression. And I think it is very deeply embedded in our culture in the United States. And I also think that active resistance to it is constantly under fire.

Do your students believe in the American dream?

It is an interesting question. We are one of the few labors Colleges in the Nation, and our students do not pay directly for their tuition and education. But you know, we have this notion of selling the College Degree as part and parcel of the American Dream. And, based on this narrative, the degree is going to get people up from poverty, it is going to "save them", we can say. And I think we are constantly reproducing this. One thing I constantly try to do with my students is to open their eyes and make them conscious of it. A degree is not their identity, but it is part of this larger narrative and it is important to problematize it. There is still this belief which is called "bootstrapped ideology", that regardless where are you from, you can pull yourself up out of the status of others.

I have listened to Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen's podcast on Spotify, called *Renegades- Born in the USA*, and Obama says that "the American Dream had never been fully available to black folks".[14] Do you agree with his words?

The American Dream has never been available to black people, nor to other identities. If you look at the Constitution and then you go back in time, black people were forcibly enslaved

[14] Barack Obama, *Renegades, Born in the USA*, Spotify, 2021.

and we cannot talk of humanism. Humanity is not recognized, so how can this dream be accessible to them?

One thing that comes out in bell hooks' works later in life is the argument she makes about Beyoncé. I think that her critique was about Beyoncé's falling into footsteps of capitalism, consumption, production and the performance of it. And the acceptance of it is problematic regardless where you are from and what color you are.

IV. Identity and Invisibility

"The black male's assertion that possessing a white woman is a triumph over racism is a false truth that masks the reality that his acceptance of her as "the" symbol of status and success is primarily an indication of the extent to which he supports and accepts patriarchy".[15] Do you believe that, in order to affirm masculinity and maintain this privilege in the American white-dominant society, black men prefer women's exploitation rather than fighting for their rights and their affirmation? Do you believe that the issue of masculinity and patriarchy are related to a present condition of invisibility that black men still experience in the American society?

Professor Feifer:

We see this playout with issues of colorism. I think it is all part of that manifestation of "white is right" and "the closer you are to whiteness gives your humanity more value". And I think this is somehow embedded in all of us in the United States. It is in everything we buy and we consume in terms of media. You see the desire of whiteness and white skin in the representation of women's bodies, who are hypersexualized. But I also think that some artists use sexualization for their own empowerment. I know that there is an interview between bell hooks and Lil' Kim, one of the firsts female rappers who came to notoriety,

[15] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 113.

where she talks a lot about her sexuality and bell asks her about love. Love is a primary concern of bell hooks' works, the radical notion of love, and how it is missing in her life and in all of our lives when we are living in a system of domination.

And is it possible that white people are fascinated by the black color of the skin?

Yes, I think that the fetish of blackness still exists and the consumption of blackness: black culture and black people are part of our society. bell makes some interesting points about how you can love interracially but still have white supremacist ideals. I think that blackness is fetishized, consumed and made popularized for capitalist purposes.

Hereto, I would like to show you the cover of Vogue Italy n. 861 of June 2022. The cover shows a black model; we can see her face and half of her back. Her arms are crossed on her breast and her gaze wanders sadly. She is adorned with jewels, whose color is a brilliant grey, and some long chains go down her arm and lock around her neck. They are supposed to be jewelry, but they make me think of bondage and taming.

It is interesting that her position is like the one of a bust. Like an African bust, and with all those jewels she is embodying some spectacle. I think that in the United States there is a wide consumption of black culture, black languages and black practices, but police are still killing black people in the streets.

We still have systemic policies that are eradicating black communities, immigrant communities, queer communities, indigenous.

Looking at that image cover, a documentary about Victoria's Secret models and the relationship between the company and the owner Jeffrey Epstein has come to my mind. One of the quotes that this fashion editor makes is that "fashion is apolitical". But I told myself: "no, it is not". Everything is political, and when I look at that cover of the Vogue, I see that it is intensely political. Why this image? Why now? Why this particular location?

I would like to approach the concept of invisibility starting from Ralph Waldo Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, since the matter of self-identity is an important point to consider in black people's life. The protagonist of Ellison's novel is an African-American man who has no name and identity. He is invisible at the eyes of the white society and he has to wear a mask every time he comes into contact with a white man. Through the character's experience, the author analyzes the concept of the subhuman, the Other, the one who is racially discriminated and, as a consequence, invisible. In *Belonging, a Culture of Place*, bell hooks writes: "Since most white people do not have to "see" black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard nor to observe black people to be safe, they can live as though black people were invisible, and they can imagine that they

are also invisible to blacks."[16] At what extent do we look at a person? How does the color of their skin influence our prejudice and judgment? From slavery onwards, during racial segregation, and up to the present time, black people have worn a mask every time they have been in contact with whites. Is this mask more a necessity or an obligation?

Professor Feifer:

I think it is an active resistance. It makes me think about Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* as a poem that speaks to the reality, the necessity and the obligation of wearing this mask. I believe that this question is relevant in terms of where we culturally are. The politics of making the other invisible but also hyper visible at the same time, invisible of their humanity but hyper visible out of the commodity to be bought and to be owned. It is just a continuation of plantation politics and the system of chattel slavery that moves into sharecropping and into Jim Crow's segregation. It has to do with racial politics, heavily.

I think that invisibility is weaponized and used as an excuse to not confront racism, to not confront white supremacy. And, apart from white and black, how many others identities get lost? And I think that invisibility as tool, as weapon and as mechanism is furthered complicated by the multiple intersections of identities.

The United States are hyper vigilant on race as a caste system, and its long history influences everything and continues

[16] hooks, *Belonging, A Culture of Place.*

to do so. What was really fascinating to me about Isabelle Wilkerson's book *Cast: The Origins of Our Discontents* was the construction of racial differences.

When I talked to my students, we came to a point that your generation has really done work around gender liberation, sexual liberation, but what I still see is hesitancy to talk about race.

I can feel this hesitation even here in Italy. I talked to some friends with African descendance about this project and I was not able to go deeper and talk first-hand about racism and black people's identity, because I do not know how much some points can hurt them. Even if they do not descend directly from slavery.

The life of every person is different and we do not share the same education, habits and culture, even if we come from the same country. This means, every black person living in the United States has a different story, different experiences and they cannot be identified under the same label "African-Americans". This is racist. People with black skin color do not come from the same territory, but they come from a continent, Africa, which is not a country, and they live in the United States, which is a confederation of 50 states where people come from all over the world. "Uniqueness" and "purity" are not possible unless we talk about the "purity of soul" and our "uniqueness" as individuals, because we are different from everybody else. I agree with bell hooks when she writes: "racism would cease to exist if everyone would just forget about race and just see each other as human beings who are the same".[17] I would like to ask you a question bell hooks reported in *Black Looks – Race and Representation*: "Don't you think we are all raised in a culture that is racist and we are all taught to be racist whether we want to be or not?"[18]

Professor Feifer:

Yes! Her framework was a sort of modes of oppression: imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, but she is saying that we understand the system and we partake the system. One thing I find really interesting about bell hooks, that I heard from her colleagues, is that she had several interracial

[17] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, p. 12.
[18] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, p. 14.

friendships. What was fascinating to me was her ability to be generous and forgiving and be able to recognize the humanity of individuals instead of being dismissive. I think we really have to nuance these conversations, because what happens frequently is that we further deny humanity. If we speak of a system we are all part of, it allows some space for us to recognize one another's humanity.

In my opinion, a way to fight racism is to look to people's humanity and see them as they really are.

Yes, and just value them and not denying the person's story by assuming the worst. Criticism necessarily is essential, but we have to start moving in the direction of constructivism, community building, and alliance building. And I see a lot of social critique and work failing to do that, because we are going back to this sort of binaries.

And I believe we should start this work with children at the elementary school.

There are so many shifts in the United States, especially right now with this neo conservativism, but to me it is more neo imperialism, neo colonialism. There are so many textbooks that deal with racing narratives of enslavement. We live in a scary time.

And this happens with schoolbooks. Let's think about the "discovery" of America by Columbus and how this narrative

is recounted in history books. We are told the story from a white European point of view, but what about native people who have find themselves slayed and extirpated from their territories? We are not told the sufferance and the pain native people have endured, but we are told Columbus and the Europeans' splendor and achievements in the American territory. This is the power of books and narratives: that it can persuade you with the brightest side of stories, without taking the worse part into consideration. This is why I firmly believe in the power of class conversations and the sharing of ideas.

I think it is also about deconstructing the power of history. Last semester, I taught in the *Early American History* class and we read Columbus diaries. While reading, I was showing the students that this is all imagined and constructed, and then it becomes history with a capital H what we take for granted.

I love Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's quote in "The Danger of a Single Story" in TedTalk, where she makes us think about what would happen if we told the story of America from the indigenous point of view.

V. Mass Media, Visuality and the Women's Body

The women's body as a land to conquer: regardless their provenance, it has always been represented in the collective imagination as a territory to conquer and capture. Let's think about the name given to the continent "discovered" by Columbus in 1492: "America" is a female. Same as the Europeans arrived in the "new world" and battled to conquer it and annihilate the native people who inhabited those territories, so is perceived the women's body – as a battlefield. It is not a woman's property but it is a territory of conquest for men. Consequently, the women's body has been idealized and it has given a new identity based on the exterior characteristics: height, weight, skin color, eyes color, hair. Individuality is extirpated and women become a mere ornament, sexual and working objects in the hands of the male owner. The "institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood", as bell hooks describes it in *Ain't I a Woman*, has encouraged white males to regard black females as prostitutes. White men who had little contact with black females during slavery were encouraged to believe they had entire access to their bodies. The myth of black women as prostitutes continued over the years and encouraged white men to take advantage of black women as if they were products on the marketplace. Are black women still seen as prostitutes and their bodies as sexual objects in the

contemporary American society? And how white and black people respectively see black and white women? Do they still have racist and sexist prejudices toward them?

Professor Feifer:

I definitely think that women's bodies, queers' bodies, trans' bodies are appropriation, monetized: they are territories of conquest. Women are still hypersexualized and seen as commodities and sexual objects. But I think that there is a lot of pushback as well. We do not spend enough time asking how do we get free. How do we liberate? Let's imagine how it is to be liberated people.

In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes: "Mass media was the weapon used to destroy the new-found independence of women. White and black women alike were subjected to endless propaganda which encouraged them to believe that a woman's place was in the home – that her fulfillment in life depended on finding the right man to marry and creating a family. If women were compelled by circumstances to work, they were told that it was better if they didn't compete with men and confined themselves to jobs like teaching and nursing. The working woman, be she black or white, found it necessary to prove her femininity. Often she developed two demeanors: though she might be assertive and independent on the job, at home she was passive and pleasing. More than ever before U.S. history, black women were obsessed with

pursuing the ideal of femininity described on television, in books and magazines. […] An emerging black middle class meant that groups of black females had more money than ever before to spend buying fashions, cosmetics, or reading magazines like *McCall's* and *Ladies Home Journal*. Masses of black women who at one time were proud of their ability to work outside the home and yet be good housewives and mothers became discontented with their lot. They wanted only to be housewives and expressed openly their rage and hostility toward black men – a hostility that emerged because they were convinced black men were not striving hard enough to assume the role of sole economic provider in the home so that they could be housewives."[19] The standard is imposed by society, mass media and its influence. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes again: "They were indeed a generation of black females – a generation that had been brainwashed not by black revolutionaries but by white society, by the media, to believe that women's place was in the home".[20] More or less at the half of the last century, black women wanted to equal white women's rights and the lifestyle. White women were housewives, they did not go to work and took care of the children. Today, in 2022, this idea of women as simple housewives is really obsolete and dated. Women want their economic independence and the opportunity to work is part of their self-realization other than having a family, being mothers and no matter what they want to achieve in their life. We have arrived at the

[19] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 177.
[20] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 184.

moment when cultural changes in the American society involve both black and white women. My question is, how do social network influence both black and white women regarding life, the choice of the partner, their studies and their job? Are social networks a source of patriarchy, racism and sexism, which are exhibited through images, logos and clichés?

Professor Feifer:

Thinking about popular shows and the different kind of narratives they produce, are we really beyond the capitalist machine of this sort of narrative? You get a job and then you support your family… it becomes complicated if you come from marginalized positions to go out and get a good job, to support family, to lift yourself up out of poverty, and help your community. All this is a pursuit of the American capitalist Dream. And this also happens with shows, which try to sell this narrative of queer the sexuality and queer the gender. In particular, I am thinking about a film, *Awkward*, which is a story of a neurodivergent student, who is forced to fit into the same sort of script and narrative. And I think that that is what continues to happen.

I can see this in social medias, because they insist on showing us a pre-fixed type of life. A life that can be compared to the "American Dream": obtaining a Degree, going to work, support family, buy a large house and live happily ever after. But in reality, every time we try to reach this kind of life, we fall. Because this particular standardized

life that social media show us is a prepackaged life, and it does not suit the needs and priorities of every person.

It is the representation of the unreal, the unattainable, and the goal of these studies that are coming out about emotions and affect in social media are really problematic. Social media do not represent actual reality, but they show a polished version of privileged life, without taking into consideration positionalities, marginalities and minorities.

Social media show "standards", but we are human being with our complexities and differences in terms of financial means, interests, habits, values, and so forth.

Exactly, and I think that the conversations are different in terms of choices of partnership, choices of studies, choices of job…I think that those are all designed differently based on positionality and access.

White racist people may believe that black people do not represent whiteness in their imagination, since they imagine the Other as subjugated and unable to understand. Racist white people have always had the power to control the black gaze and annihilate it, by making the black person feel invisible. Rather, black people remain silent about the representation of whiteness in their imagination and they prefer to "wear a mask" in order not to manifest their sense of discomfort in the presence of white people. In *Black Looks- Race and Representation*, bell hooks explains the inverted stereotypical vision of whiteness through the eyes of black people: "Black becomes synonymous with goodness and white with evil" and the representation of whiteness is formed "as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white domination".[21]

Can you give some examples of the representation of white women through black people's gaze? For example, some piece of art, literature, music…

Professor Feifer:

White women's tears are acts of terrorism. If you are confronting race, often there is a conversation of white women crying. For example, every time white people call the police out of fear for blackness, this creates a problem. There is even a Law and Order SVU series where a white woman calls the police for an African-American man who is jogging in Central Park, and he is arrested by a white officer, who asks him questions that

[21] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, p. 169.

imply racism and a mechanism of silent violence. The ways in which this sort of resistance flips to call attention to white violence, specifically white women's violence, is important. The association of whiteness with evil and blackness with goodness is done as a response to trauma, but the pain and the anguish as consequence of white domination remain. But I think that we cannot stop at the white as synonymous with evil; I feel that it is the responsibility of white folks to unpack that. I think that a critical gaze is necessary and essential to ask larger questions about white supremacy and about the ways it impacts our own humanities as white people. I think that a critical gaze is important but if we stop there we can fall into this trap of dehumanization. I think that social movements are great in being critical, thinking critically, but we have to make the move towards constructivism. What does it mean to construct? To imagine and to work in communities? Is that possible?

VI. Racism in the US

In Belonging, Culture of Place, bell hooks writes: "This is why it has been difficult to honestly talk about race. We are surrounded by a profound silence about race. And the talk we hear, the public talk about race is usually just a pouring of gasoline onto the fire. Most of it does nothing to end racism. It's the profound silence that we live within because we lack a language that is complex enough. Our task as people who love justice is to create that language. And to affirm those social contexts where white and black folks bond beyond race. […] There is no psychological practice that specifically focuses on recovery from racist victimization. Indeed, our society has moved in the opposite direction. Many people in our nation, especially white people, believe that racism has ended. Consequently, when black people attempt to give voice to the pain of racist victimization, we are likely to be accused of playing the "race" card."

How many white women are killed every year in the United Stated because of sexism? How many black women are killed every year in the United States because of sexism and racism? How many black men are killed every year in the United States because of racism? How many black men's deaths are reported on TV or newspapers? And how many black women's deaths?

What are, in your opinion, the best ways to fight racism? Do you believe that teachers in school pay attention to racism and other types of discrimination? According to bell hooks, we need to "decolonize our minds and our imaginations"[22] in order to fight racism.

Professor Feifer:

I agree with what she says about the need to decolonize. There is a great article by an indigenous scholar, which says that decolonization is not a metaphor. Therefore, we cannot use a term like "decolonization" and remove it from what it actually means by giving lands and resources back. So, this move to "decolonize" education, "decolonize" political conversations, misses the point of the materiality of these conversations. I prefer using the term "unlearning" rather than "decolonizing". When bell hooks writes: "Our task as people who love justice is to create that language. And to affirm those social contexts where white and black folks bond beyond race", I do feel that this is the role of education and the role of being an educator is holding space to do that work of "unlearning" and to teach students or build what students already know. I do believe that this is the work of any educator, and education is definitely a vocation. It is not an easy work, but it is a work of the heart. Some of my favorite works of bell hooks are specifically her pieces on education and her teaching trilogy where she really dives in talking about what engages pedagogy. She believed – and I believe in this, too – that class, especially in higher

[22] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, p. 178.

education, is the most radical space. Because there is something profound that happens in any learning communities where this work is happening, and I do think that it is important for us to walk outside the walls of the classroom. And so, how do we come together and recognize collective forms of oppression in the way in which we engage with the isolating relationships of privilege and oppression in different settings? How does it operate in our lives? How can we be more conscious to, and aware of, and speak to? In my classrooms, I try to follow bell's suggestions to reimagine a critical space to do the work of learning that is necessary for the world. And I always tell my students that I try for us to think collectively, like how we can show up and be in the world, recognizing everyone's fundamental humanity, having this deep sense of love and commitment.

I think that any *-ism* is a violence, and what happens when we fall into a sort of identity politics is really a distraction from doing the actual work. I think that *-isms* require unlearning and critical thought in community, dialogue, empathy, the recognition of one other's humanity and experiences.

I believe that a question we, as students, should ask ourselves every year before the first day of class, is "what does freedom mean for me?" Because talking about freedom and asking about freedom is something we do not often do.

Yes, because there is something dangerous about that. If we are busy people, we are only fighting for what this potential future could be.

In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes: "In America, white racist ideology has always allowed white women to assume that the word woman is synonymous with white woman, for women of other races are always perceived as Other, as dehumanized beings who do not fall under the heading woman".[23] At this purpose, I was wandering about the reason why we need to specify the skin color of black people every time we refer to them. For example, we tend to say "she is a black writer", rather than "she is a writer", because this implies that the person's color of the skin is white… how much does our Eurocentric white-dominant vision of the world affect our perception of the "Other"?

Professor Feifer:

What is fascinating about bell hooks is that, when she talked about feminism, she never says "I am a feminist" or "I identify with the feminist movement". And more, she did not identify with a "black feminist". In some paper we are now digitizing at Berea College, she talks about race and blackness, but I barely ever see her say "as a black feminist". Every time I am reading or designing a class for my students around a particular writer, I want to emphasize their multiple identities, as a way of nuancing how we are reading the literature or the art that they create.

About the question concerning the assumed, the fact that saying "she is a writer" implies that she is white, I think that folks of color, and I see it with bell hooks, are pushing back

[23] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, p. 138-139.

against this, because it implies and presumes so much about limitations, of what she can write about. Can she write about anything outside of being black?

Besides, we use the adjective "black" rather than the name of their country, if we want to specify black people's origin. For example, we tend to say "she is a black writer", rather than "she is a Nigerian writer" or "she is an African-American writer". And then, why do we have to say "African" if the writer in question is born in America, lives in America, feels American, and their roots are American from generations and generations? Why do we need to specify the color of their skin by using the adjective "African" together with "American"?

I think that people should choose how they want to present their work. I see your point because I think a lot about that in terms of Toni Morrison: when I talk to my students, I always describe her as a great American writer, but she is often excluded from the American literature and she is included in the African-American literature. But it is complicated. Because there are some writers who want that hyphenated identity and some who do not.

VII. Belonging, Uprooting and Displacement

Belonging. **Leaving our native place in order to go far away or abroad to study can affect our identity. bell hooks left Kentucky in order to go westward and study at University. The matter of going westward does have an important meaning in the United States, and it is also a significant trope in literature. It implies going toward the unknown, toward the unexplored and through the wilderness in order to experience better places. In fact, if we relate it with bell hooks' youth experience, she left Kentucky in order to start her adult life far from home. This concept implies both freedom and fear. How did this tension between the new and the old, the left home and the new home, the new life and the old life affect bell hooks' life as a student and then as an intellectual in terms of racial discourse (since she left a comfortable place, her family, in order to explore the unknown)? How is "going westward" perceived in contemporary American culture?**

Professor Feifer:

Honestly and vulnerably, bell hooks talks about a home that she does not feel her own. Home as a very complicated place: not only Kentucky and the Jim Crow's South, but also what she experiences in the house itself. I think that going to College, for her, to Stanford, was an experience of both joy and disappointment. She gets there and immediately realizes that

people look at her because of her blackness and her southern provenance. But she critically looks into this space as an opportunity and a location to grow. And she does it: she grows in direct response to resistance. But I think that alongside of that is the loneliness, the depression and the sadness she experienced. What I think is really beautiful is that at the end of her life she comes back to Kentucky and she gives this wonderful commencement speech where she says "Kentucky is my faith".

What going West means in terms of culture depends on the larger narrative that includes frontiers, and today our final frontiers are the outer space and the oceans. I think that for folks and communities of color, certain cities in the West were supposed to be metropolis during the Great Migration, and free of racial violence and deaths, and that has not proven to be true. Cities like Seattle, Portland, San Francisco are becoming once again white upper-class spaces.

In bell hooks' book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, this concept of talking back is uprooted in her childhood as a black girl growing up in a rural Kentucky. And what meant to talk back for her, and how radical that was…

In *Belonging, a Culture of Place*, bell hooks describes a sense of loneliness that she experienced every time she was far from home (Kentucky), but she was even convinced that her destiny did not belong to Kentucky: Kentucky was only the final destination of her journey. Do you believe that

everyone's journey in this world is a voyage in search for identity and personal sense of our existence?

Professor Feifer:

Yes, it is! And I even think that home is fundamentally within ourselves and within our communities. What I think is so profound about bell hooks' work is that her life is so rooted in this journey of finding home, the sense of self and belonging. I think that this is one of the gifts she left us. And in my own life, when I think about this, I definitely feel that every people's lifetime is part of this journey. And also, think about this collective journey, this collective voyage, and place where we carry this ancestral grief, this ancestral trauma along with us and how that defines us as individuals and us in relationship to community.

Our first community is family and, as bell hooks did, every time we move away from family for work or study, we need to find another community in which we can identify and express ourselves at best. A community where we can share ideas, points of view, opinions, but where we can feel as if we were at home.

I was reading something about the typo of people to keep in your life – in terms of personality – and it is good to have someone who adores you, as well as to have someone who challenges and questions you to the point that you question yourself and question your motives. And therefore, I think those communities are really important and necessary.

And I think that bell hooks needed those communities and also needed to change communities – to travel far away – in order to find other people who could challenge her and move her forward in terms of personal growth.

Yes, you are right. I think she really believed that. Critical thinking is an ongoing process: the creation of self and our multiple selves is done in community with other people. And this is something really central to her work that sometimes gets lost.

VIII. Diaspora

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word *diaspora* is "descended from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, meaning *to scatter, to spread about*".[24] The word "African diaspora" is used to indicate the migratory flux from Africa to America, which firstly took place with the first slave trade in the 16th century and which still goes on, but in a different way. The necessity to go away and leave the hometown was a concrete fact that happened when black people started leaving the south and moved north. This "diaspora" is a psychological reflection of black people's past. This decision to leave the south, the homeland, is in a way the will to take distance from their past diaspora and enslavement, in order to hope a better future where equality erases racism and prejudices.

Related to the discourse on *blackness*, nowadays there are two distinct generations of black people living in the United States: those who are the descendant of the first diaspora (those people who are descendant of slavery and racial segregation and who have fought for their emancipation and their rights in the United States) and those who come from the *new diaspora* of the 1950s and 1960s, 1980s and the 2000s. They do not share the same "memory". The new diaspora enriches with new nuances the relation among blackness, national belonging and civil memory.

[24] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora

Hence, which are the differences between the new generations of African Americans and the descendants of the first diaspora? Which are the crucial aspects in which the building of their identity differentiates? Which is the difference between the American blackness and the African blackness and how is it reflected in literature? And lastly, do you believe that writing about slavery in order to increase people's awareness about the atrocities committed in the past could be a way to heal the wounds that are still open?

Professor Feifer:

I think these are really great questions. This is an entire semester's work. I like how you framed these multiple diasporas, because it is what they are. I think that in the late 90s and early 2000s we see a shift that really focuses on other communities, and I think it is the same with a sort of narrative of trauma, as well. Coming back to this first diaspora, I don't know how often we spend time thinking about black experiences in the United States as diasporic experiences. Aside from folks coming from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, these sort of displacements and dislocations that come from diaspora being part of the transatlantic slave trade, are inseparable from the resilience and the surviving, the beauty, and the culture that was created out of those atrocities. Christina Sharpe's work *In the Wake* and Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* are really profound pieces that try to make these connections. And Dionne Brand is talking about the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian diaspora, also spending time speaking of the United States.

This is the first diaspora, but then we have multiple waves moving out and away from racial and sexual violence. I think they all have their own language and experience, cultural practice, and I think it is hard to answer this without diving into each one, but I think that there is a deep and profound connection between them.

Your last question is hard. Oftentimes, as an educator, I question myself about how do we talk about diaspora without triggering or traumatizing or using the image of violence done to black folks. This happens because we sometimes assume that people know the history, but a lot of them don't. The New York Times *1619 Project* is one step toward this, but how do we have these conversations without making transparent the white gaze consuming violence that has been done generationally to black folks? To answer this question, I think we have to have these conversations but refrain how we have them. And I think there are folks who are creating tools with which to do that. Therefore, thinking about Christina Sharpe's metaphor of *The Wake*, which is what we are living, how do we see this manifest in our daily life? And it is absolutely essential to talk about black joy and what has grown in the mix of total chaos. And the resistance, and the resilience. I think that this conversation needs to happen, but the script has to be flipped, and there has to be an accountability component and a real clear understanding of what is its connection to the present moment.

Authors who write about black stories because they want to make the African experience in America alive, are not studied in Italy. And I believe that they are neither

studied in the rest of Europe. But now, here in Europe, we are living the same diaspora that happened in the United States many centuries ago and continues to be an actual fact.

It goes back to your question of the way in which we categorize into little boxes and we disallow any real nuance, and by doing so, we are not telling full stories. We are not telling everyone's truth.

IX. Slavery

A question bell hooks was asked in *Belonging: a Culture of Place.*

- **Do you think that slavery has ended or it has simply taken new forms?**

bell hooks: "Well, I think it has taken on new forms. A lot of white people are thinking of themselves as slaves, and some of them are "successful" people. You have a whole society that is saying, "Thank God. It's Friday." They are thinking of themselves as involuntary servants complicit in their own shackling."

This is bell hooks' answer. Do you agree with her or would you like to add something more?

Professor Feifer:

I think that it has taken a new form: forms of enslavement, for example, human trafficking. I think that what she is trying to get here is that in a capitalist economy where people have to work to make money, I am complicit in my sort of enslavement – but that is not the same kind of enslavement. I think that forms of enslavement continue in various ways. I also think about the ways in which this statement of complicity fails to consider the resistance and the rebellion. I think what scares with it is when you see sex trafficking and human trafficking is

becoming much more talked about in the United States, and you see the narrative in the language of enslavement mapped onto this and mapped onto whiteness.

Nowadays, we live in a kind of "enslaved" society, but we are conscious that our personal way of living is in part our choice. But if we compare this to what slavery really was it is outrageous to find similarities and compare the two.

It depends on your positionality, because for some folks it is impossible to quit their jobs, otherwise they cannot buy food. But yes, slavery was a different cup of tea.

X. Memory

In which way do you think the memory of the African-American people's heritage and the fact of being a black woman have influenced bell hooks' private and intellectual life?

Professor Feifer:

I think memory has to do with collective memories, with ancestral memories, with diasporic memories. All of her works speak to the ways in which she was shaped by her blackens and her gender. But for bell hooks there is no separation between private and intellectual life. It is all fluid and you see that in her public writings, as well as in her personal writings, she is figuring out who she is in relation to community, belonging, and all those -*isms*. And I think memory is important to her; she often talks about her grandma and Baba, being very influential in terms of her legacy of resistance. And also taking the name "bell hooks" specifically in memory of this family figure who was known for talking back. What she does for us is nuancing all the complexities: our home can be home, but also a complicated place, and what it means to yearn for that and find yourself in that. She does something that I think is really amazing in terms of looking at complexity and finding ways in which one can navigate that and negotiate that. In her papers, bell hooks talks about her relationship with certain members of her family, and

she is very honest and vulnerable about the meaning of her lifetime and to make sense of that, and to forgive, in many cases.

XI. Language

I have a question related to the use of language by minorities. Today, since we live in a globalized world, children grow up learning a second language from a very young age. The better is when children speak two languages since their childhood. Here in Italy, I have remarked that children whose parents are both Italian and those whose parents are one Italian and the other European, are praised if they can speak two languages. On the contrary, children of immigrants parents or people coming from Africa or Asia – even if they are not the first generation to come to Europe – and who still speak their native language at home, are seen with suspicion, and I regret to say that we still see them with a racist eye even though they are perfectly integrated in society and they are people we can trust and rely on. At this point, I would like to know if this happens also in the United States, and eventually, at what extent are people discriminated while living in a country where when one says "I am American" this implies being a melting pot of genes that come from all over the world. And lastly, do you believe that we should be more concerned about minorities and thank them for the enrichment they can bring to our culture?

Professor Feifer:

I learned that first hand, when I talked to a labor who worked for a non-profit organization that sold local crops, and he was figuring out how to speak to me because he spoke five different languages but not English. But I saw the ways in which the imperialist and colonialist "one right way" has led to limitations and the failure of it. I love talking to people who now more than one language because there are some words that you cannot express in English – English is such a heavy language, and it does not comprise all of the meanings. We do a real violence when we force this "English only" imperialist rhetoric. I see this in this country a lot, and even in the education system, because the study of languages is considered an "addendum", a plus that students can add on their education plan. I think people are seen as suspect based on their physical appearance, but also linguistically. I really appreciate Gloria Anzaldúa's work around speaking multiple languages but being forced to speak one. I think this is a melting pot. We are starting to see the ways in which, very literally, the populations numbers are shifting radically. This generation is not having as many children, and very soon I think whiteness will become a minority, which would allow for more nuanced conversations and that the recognition of this experience is in the value of being multilingual, being culturally diverse. I think that a real brutal confrontation is coming and my hope is that from that, we will blossom.

What I really like of the United States is this everyday confrontation of cultures in one unique Nation. I think that this sharing is enriching for all people who experience it.

The beauty of the new cultures that are created out of that mixing is what is deeply lost in this continuing violence.

And what we need is to eradicate violence and accept our humanity.

Even thinking about the blending and mixing of languages, how many possibilities come from that! And denying that is just absurd.

XII. Being American

What does "being American" mean in your opinion?

Professor Feifer:

America is complicated. There are many social constructs that we have to unpack: there is privilege and oppression, there is beauty of the land and the people, and violence. I think it requires one's awareness of who you are and where you come from. You learn your Americanness when you travel outside the United States: what that actually means and looks like in a much larger global context, versus what you learn and experience in the United States. I think it is important to recognize how your passport as an American citizen privileges you.

For many people living out of the United States, being American is associated with the American Dream, and therefore, it is fascinating.

It comes up in many narratives. In this moment I find myself threatened outside of the US, and I think that I am American – I am exceptional in some way – and I do not understand how this can happen. But it is just a construct of maps, borders and boundaries. It is hundreds of years of narrative of power.

What do you think about multiethnicity in the United States and what do you wish to the future generations who are fighting against racism?

Professor Feifer:

As someone who loves literature and texts, I think stories are what connect us; they evoke emotions to recognize relationality. And that is crucial to recognize humanity and our similarities, and understand that I cannot be free unless you are free. Therefore, we have a lot of work to do, and it starts from the deep listening of one another. We need to make space to listen to one another's stories. To value someone else's stories. I believe in the power of stories and I believe in the power of truth, because there are multiple truths. And we arrive at that by listening.

Personally, I am fascinated by the possibility to talk to people whose roots come from all over the world, and learn from them that some aspects of their stories concern me closely. I believe that racism is a lack of openness and interest in other people's cultures, religions, and aspects of their life. For me, listening to people's stories and having the possibility to speak to them represents the essence of our humanity, singularity but also similarity in the difference. And if we only pay attention, we would discover that our roots come from the same ground, and that they are intertwined with each other. But sometimes, because of our blindness, we do not notice that what is theirs is also ours, and we need them to figure it out.

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What is a dream but a pursuit of freedom?

Racism, oppression, and fear of the Other.
Men, women, identities and memory.

A conversation with Megan Feifer upon the American society, intertwined with bell hooks' essays:

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