

hooks, bell. (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press

Book review by

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Dr. Jekatyerina Dunajeva received her PhD at the University of Oregon. In her dissertation, she examined how schooling affected Roma identity formation over time in Hungary and Russia. Dr. Dunajeva's research has been published in several book chapters and peer-reviewed journals. Her fields of research are Roma, political and ethnic identity, youth politics, and state- and nation-building. In addition to teaching at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Dr. Dunajeva collaborates with international research groups, working as a consultant and political analyst.



Published nearly 30 years ago as the Berlin Wall fell and Eastern Europe emerged from Communism, bell hooks' 1989 book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* has never been more relevant to the plight of Roma as it is today. The book represents the desire to challenge oppression and to speak up against racism, bigotry, and white supremacy from the perspective of the oppressed; thus, the collection of essays is a compelling combination of personal and theoretical arguments. Similarly, there is a growing need in Romani Studies to take a more critical look at the field, accounting for past and present injustices from within – theorized, analyzed, and recounted by Roma themselves. As the inaugural volume of *Critical Romani Studies Journal* emerged from a series of discussions, debates, conferences and constructive meetings, bell hooks' writings returned to mind.

Writing about the oppression of Black women and their craving to speak in their own voice, hooks discusses the struggle of self-identification, self-representation, and self-realization of marginalized groups. The parallels between the subjugation of the silenced Black women and contemporary forms of oppression of the Roma run on many levels; in many ways the Black feminist movement enlightens while also raises constructive questions about the Roma struggle.

hooks defines “talking back” as “speaking as an equal to an authority figure” (5). Silence – or an inability to speak for oneself, to object practices of domination, and to challenge the existing social hierarchy – is viewed as the “right speech” for the oppressed (6). “The context of silence is varied and multi-dimensional” (8) and can be found within family, community, or society. Silencing, in other words, happens nearly everywhere, as “we live in a world in crises – a world governed by politics of domination” (19). Silence itself is not the lack of speaking; instead, it is an act of submission. To overcome this submission means not only to “emerge from silence into speech” (6), but to make speech heard.

The act of domination means maintaining control over a group. There are many forms of domination that can be based on class, race, or other characteristics. Reminiscent of Marxist ideology, hooks argues that these forms of domination necessarily result in oppression and exploitation, pushing oppressed groups to the margins. “To be in the margin”, hooks writes, “is to be part of the whole but outside of the body” (1990: 341), where the body can be seen as the society.

For hooks, achieving critical consciousness, when forms of oppression are brought to the surface and, importantly, acted upon, is an important turning point. “To speak when one was not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring”, hooks writes (5). Indeed, talking back is empowering. It is empowerment. It is “the expression of [...] the movement from object to subject – the liberated voice” (9).

hooks does not view marginality as an incapacitating state. On the contrary, in her other work (1990) She sees marginality as “much more than a site of deprivation [...] it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” for the “oppressed, exploited and colonized people” (1990: 341–2). Marginality is the precondition for a struggle to emerge that generates counter-hegemonic discourse, which in turn may become the voice constituting critical consciousness.

hooks is not so much concerned about the consolidating effect of this consciousness: does it turn into a mobilizing platform for all the oppressed? Does it tie together their grievances in a coherent agenda

in order to challenge the oppressive system? Spivak, for instance, distinguishes collective consciousness from other forms. She sees “strategic use of positivist essentialism”, or in other words the subaltern groups embracing essentialism, as a way to gain political voice (1988: 13). In turn, strategic interest is the framework for collective consciousness to emerge.

There is an acute need to speak, according to hooks, about the discriminating hierarchical structure but also to express varied dimensions of life interpreted by those who live it, rather than the mere observers. Expressions may come in words – such as poetry or fiction writing – in images, such as paintings, or through music and lyrics. Language, images, and sounds are all places of struggle.

Just as hooks contemplates whether Bob Marley’s lyrics, “We refuse to be what you wanted us to be” (14) is appreciated fully by white people, so one can wonder whether the words of *Jelem, Jelem*, the Roma anthem, now commonly played at Roma-related events of all sorts, are properly honored, respected, and acknowledged. Perhaps fully appreciating these words would require an intimate knowledge of the past and present forms of oppression that such groups endure. The anthem is seeped in pain and pride simultaneously, about being an outcast while maintaining happiness; the anthem is a strong message to act, “Now is the time, rise up Roma now”.

Several further questions arise: if feminism is the liberation struggle for women, what is the liberation struggle for Roma women? Or, more generally, for all Roma? Is it part of a larger struggle to eradicate all forms of domination and racial differences, or a unique struggle distinct from others? These questions are at the heart of debates inside and outside of academia today. What is certain, according to Hooks, is that an organized liberation movement is a precondition for critical consciousness, which is necessary for a mindful rethinking of white supremacy and giving agency to the subaltern.

Furthermore, awakening Black women to the need for change (33) is critical for Hooks as much as awakening Roma is critical for the Roma Rights movement. For Hooks, academia and academicians play an imperative role in fostering a critical consciousness among those who are oppressed. Hooks naturally turns to academia as an academic herself. Education can be a “practice of freedom”, a platform where critical discussions and debates take place (62). Increasingly, we see Roma scholars assume similar roles by promoting Roma arts, culture, scholarship, films, and many other forms of self-expression.

Scholars can also participate in the liberation of the oppressed by theorizing the struggle. Hooks writes: “We are not rushing to create feminist theory and I for one think that is tragic. We may not be doing so precisely because of our fears of articulating that which is abstract” (39). Whether it was fear, inability, or unwillingness in Romani Studies to articulate certain forms of oppression (such as the predominantly white cohort of academics writing about Roma and consequently the inherent biases), in recent years the discipline has been maturing side by side with a growing awareness about the injustices Roma face.

Educating the oppressed is another aspect of developing critical consciousness. Just like the feminist struggle needs feminist education, “Women’s Studies [...] can be places where education is the practice of freedom, the place for liberatory pedagogy” (51).

The role, responsibility, and actions taken by advocates who belong to the white majority must be well thought out. Ethical considerations are imperative when writing about oppression and the oppressed: “When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination” (43). Importantly, *how* and *why* we talk about otherness distinguishes oppressive talks from liberating ones; “we fear those who speak about us who do not speak to us and with us”, hooks writes (1990: 343). The continuing bias even in academia that should be more aware of injustices is “overvaluation of work done by whites” (43–44) at the expense of works done by Blacks, Roma, or other minorities.

At the core of the struggle is the celebration of diversity, gaining voice, while insisting on eradication of oppression in society. hooks highlights that diversity exists within groups as well, and Black communities vary in their culture and lifestyle (121). While these goals are noble, Hooks acknowledges that strategies of inclusion have not been developed. Hooks also falls short on defining equality and how equality can be attained through the struggle against oppression and domination. What is certain is that assimilation is never the answer, since it carries the white-supremacist normative logic: “While assimilation is seen as an approach that assures the successful entry of black people into the mainstream, at its very core it is dehumanizing” (67).

There is much to learn from the path of others’ struggle. What unites these struggles is the subaltern position of the silenced, whose very marginal position can be a source of empowerment, and out of which a struggle is borne that strives to confront issues of discrimination.

References

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