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**POSSIBILITIES OF LIBERATION IN DIALOGUE:  
A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF HOOKS AND BAKHTIN**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

### POSSIBILITIES OF LIBERATION IN DIALOGUE: A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF HOOKS AND BAKHTIN

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This work examines some of the technical elements of Mikhail Bakhtin's rather complex theory of language concentrating on establishing a basic understanding of Bakhtin's notions of "dialogic", "utterance", and "speech genres". I offer an account of why bell hooks prescribes dialogue between women and men as the next important step in women's liberation including my own responses to hooks' analysis of the need for and usefulness of this next step. Fueled by Bakhtin's theory, I contest that hooks has oversimplified the problem in two important ways. I explore the tension between the sorts of ideal dialogues Bakhtin has in mind with actual sample conversations implying that dialogue itself does not guarantee the kind of recognition of female subjectivity that hooks wants. Also, I account for some strategies hooks offers to get dialogue between women and men off the ground. I find this element of hooks' "solution" useful because it helps us imagine contexts for critical dialogue to flourish. I also link up hooks' vision of such contexts with Bakhtin's concept of speech genre.

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## INTRODUCTION

The work in this paper stems from my fascination with how theories of language allow us to understand the patriarchal context in which we live. I believe that such theories are valuable in several ways. It is through our relationship with language that we give expression to our experience of the world around us. Metaphorically understood, language is a lens with which we toy, adjust, and look through to make sense of and assign meaning to our experiences. Like the lens of a camera, there are many variables required in achieving focus. And when all the variables match up just so in that one split-second, we occasionally snap that perfect picture. The picture of the world as we see it.

With this in mind, I have chosen to begin this discussion with the works of bell hooks, the Black feminist cultural critic and Mikhail Bakhtin, the Soviet language theorist. This paper is not a defense of either thinker. Rather, it is an attempt at understanding communicative acts between women and men living in a pervading patriarchal state. More specifically, it is an examination of the possibility of liberation from male oppression existing in such dialogue. I must confess that the results of this examination do not

inspire optimism. But, I remain convinced that theories of language give us one way of scrutinizing the inner workings of dialogue. Beyond any semantic conception of language, we can get an account of the ways in which we use language and what that use reveals about ourselves. We can get a glimpse into what it might mean for dialogue to become a useful and important means of ending women's oppression. It is in that glimpse where I find hope.

In Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, bell hooks discusses the importance of speech as a tool for liberation; liberation from racial and gender oppression.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, makes new life and new growth possible. (hooks, 1989, p.9)

The acts of speaking about and giving voice to one's own oppression and liberation are important and personally familiar to hooks as a black feminist committed to radical social change. Like many women with similar commitments, bell hooks does not always receive positive acclaim for giving voice to her feminist concerns. She notes that as a black woman she is often regarded by "black folks" as being "uppity" and a "trouble-maker".

In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, 'back talk' and 'talking back' meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion. (hooks, 1989, p.5)

Some recognize this childhood sanction against talking back, but may label it "mouthing off", "giving lip" or "sassing



back". In any case, such a negative response is frequently the first experience or memory we have of disagreeing with those in power (i.e., parents or care-givers). Even as eager to please as we often are as children, many of us "talk back" again and again until either we are recognized or we learn to be quiet.

Once out of the domain of our parents and in school and other new environments, we are again confronted with sanctions against challenging authority. This is especially true if you are female and black. Young girls are conditioned to behave according to the white patriarchal values of malestream America. This is reflected in speech in at least two ways. A young black girl learns when and where to speak proper English and she learns when to remain silent.

But by observing and partaking in the "women-talk" around her as a child, hooks learned the value and the power of speech. Rather than being shut-down or shut-up, she became fluent in the language of the predominantly white academy while still retaining the language of "black folks". She discovered new ways of expressing her ideas and getting across her message: "We will not be silenced." We as women, we as black people and most specifically for hooks we as black women will not be made silent and forced to comply with the values of the hegemonic<sup>1</sup> white, patriarchal culture.

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<sup>1</sup>Following hooks' lead, I use the terms hegemonic and dominant as roughly synonymous terms. By both I mean that people in such structures have restrictions and limitations placed upon them which work to suppress their agency. Hence, when using the word

In this paper, I hope to demonstrate that hooks is onto something important in her appeal to speech as a means of liberation although she understates the complexity of this kind of dialogue. She is also mistaken in her assertion that it is women who must make such dialogue happen. Women have tried to carry out conversations addressing male domination but remain stymied by men who refuse to acknowledge them as subjects. To carry out this task, I will begin with a brief discussion of some of the key elements in Bakhtin's theory of language which I believe can shed considerable light on this matter.

#### I. BAKHTIN'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Bakhtin's theory of language has enjoyed an increasing popularity since his death in 1975. His concepts of dialogue and difference have been applied primarily in comparative literature. But, beyond its literary applications his concepts of dialogic speech genres and utterances which address difference can be used as part of a liberatory technique for undermining hegemonic discourse. The fascination Bakhtin had with difference and the dialogic can enhance our recognition, in others and ourselves, of the various voices of race, class and gender. While Bakhtin never specifically addresses issues of race and gender and seems merely to toy with the idea of class in his works, his concepts of dialogue, voice and utterance readily lend

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hegemonic I mean that which has come to be dominant and which oppresses, exploits, coerces and enslaves.

themselves to these concerns. Moreover, his theory of language seems to be headed in the right direction because he points out the powerful nature of language in an wide variety of contexts.

In this section of the paper, I will elucidate some of the key elements of Bakhtin's rather complex theory of language. First, I will explain how his conceptualization of language sharply breaks with the traditional way in which language was regarded and analyzed. Then, I will set forth Bakhtin's notions of utterance and speech genre and how they are useful in analyzing dialogue between women and men.

#### **A. How is Bakhtin unique?**

In part, Bakhtin develops his theory as a response to nineteenth century linguists such as Saussure, Vossler and von Humboldt. While unable to deny the idea that language is communicative action, they all proposed monological<sup>2</sup> views of language. Over time, two marked camps among the linguists developed: 1) the abstract objectivists and 2) the individual subjectivists. Ferdinand de Saussure is an abstract objectivist and holds that language is a formal system comprised of rules that the speaker must follow and does not have an active part in changing. Linguistic analysis of this variety focused not on how the individual made use of the system of language but instead on the system itself and its formal rules. In contrast, Karl Vossler recommends an

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<sup>2</sup>See below, p.6, for a fuller explanation of this term and its opposite, dialogical.

approach which emphasizes the creativity of language rather than its rules. On this view, speakers are able to manipulate language to express their thoughts and opinions. Still others like Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the importance of language in terms of its ability to enable a person to reflect and introspect while the communicative function is noted as an interesting secondary feature or side-effect.

Bakhtin finds his most serious opposition in Saussure. Put simply, Saussure relies on "...the systematic aspect of a language as it exists in one moment of time without considering its history." (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p.221) For Saussure, language exists in a kind of timeless vacuum. Language serves as a differential system of signs which we use to express our ideas, our feelings and our experiences. Through language we can comment on our history, our social context and our reality, but our language remains unaffected by these elements. It is suspended in time and is cut off from the reality about which it communicates. No matter how vivid and expressive the language, it is, by Saussure's account, dead. From this perspective, language amounts merely to a complicated system of rules and signs.

Today, this kind of Saussurian approach to language is regarded as somewhat archaic. Now, most language philosophers quickly recognize that meaning is not contained exclusively in words and rules of grammatical structure. But, during Saussure's heyday to analyze a language meant to look at it from the point of view of a linguist (i.e., to study it in

terms of phonemes, syntax and grammar). Bakhtin was so resolutely against this approach that he named the subject of his theoretical investigations "communication" rather than language. Bakhtin contends that to treat language as a kind of antiseptic, linguistic exercise unencumbered by the social context in which it occurs is an artificial and unproductive way of trying to understand how language works.

Bakhtin convincingly argues that language does not transcend the experiences of reality but rather is affected by it as we seek to give expression to that experience. Historical, social and political contexts are inextricably bound up in language. The words themselves as symbols or signs tell us little. But the words imbued with the speaker's own unique situatedness in the world create meaning for us.

Instead, Bakhtin offers the utterance as the basic element of dialogue. It is through the utterance as a unit of speech communication that Bakhtin demonstrates what he believes is the true dialogical nature of language. His emphasis on the utterance and speech genre arises out of his belief that language is a product of society and not external to it.

Before I analyze Bakhtin's conception of an utterance, let me first examine the meaning and ontological assumptions of dialogue or what is often termed dialogical or dialogism<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>It has been remarked by many Bakhtin scholars that Bakhtin himself never used the word 'dialogism' although it is often attributed to him.

One way of doing so is to contrast dialogue with its opposite, monologue. Monologue is not just one person talking aloud. Rather, it expresses a particular kind of perspective on the world. To engage in a monologue is to see one's self as the subject and all other agents as relational objects. The self's identity is thought to be self-defined. Charles Taylor notes that such a person would be interpreted as an agent who is understood

...not primarily as the locus of representations, but as engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on the world. (Taylor, 1991, p.308)

Monologism as an approach is one which centers on individual subjects who apprehend their world and act upon it completely independently of others as co-speakers. Monologism concentrates on a 'pre-packaged' or completely formed self, generally unaffected by others which understands and interacts with the world as an integral whole.

Similarly for Bakhtin, dialogue is not just the simple case of two or more people conversing. More fully understood, dialogue is

...the extensive set of conditions that are immediately modeled in any actual exchange between two (or more) persons but are not exhausted in such an exchange. Ultimately, dialogue means communication between simultaneous differences. (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p.9)

A dialogical act, then, is one in which the agent's perceptions and actions simultaneously take into account the perception and action of others and the world around her/him.

An agent exists not as an observer but as an "integrated, non-individual agent." The social realms in which we exist are impacted upon or shaped by us and, reciprocally, impact upon and shape us. We influence our spheres of activity and they, in turn, influence us.

...[O]ur identity is never simply defined in terms of our individual properties. It also places us in a social space. We define ourselves partly in terms of what we come to accept as our appropriate place within dialogical actions. (Taylor, 1991, p.311)

Moreover, as a self, the agent recognizes other internalized voices which may express pain, needs, likes or desires. These other voices shape and define who the agent is.

Reasoning about language dialogically is a way of taking into account the rich diversity, heterogeneity and possibility in the world around us. It expresses not one meaning but the potentiality of there being multiple meanings in an utterance. Dialogism strips away the assumption that Meaning or Truth is potentially determined by some authoritative figure even if that figure monopolizes the exchange. Rather, dialogism acknowledges and revels in the multifarious viewpoints and interpretations found in all human perspectives. Understood in this way, Meaning or Truth is contextual and as such, we "author" each other's Meaning and Truth. We make joint contributions and each contribution is important, just as each stroke of paint can be thought of as contributing to the whole painting. Dialogue also acts as a bridge which links us to all of our particular pasts and presents and all the

possibilities of meanings which exist therein. This exchange among possibilities is achievable through the utterance.

### **B. Utterance**

Bakhtin holds that the utterance is the key concept for understanding language as a communicative process. To understand the significance Bakhtin attaches to the utterance we must first comprehend what it is. It is important to keep in mind that the utterance is not monological, rather it

...is a link in the chain of speech communication, and cannot be broken off from the preceding links that determined it both from within and from without, giving rise within it to unmediated responsive re-actions and dialogic reverberations. (Bakhtin, 1986, p.94)

The Bakhtinian utterance is dialogic precisely in the degree to which every aspect of it is a give-and-take... (Bakhtin, 1981, p.60)

It is not the product of an active speaker acting upon a passive listener. Contrary to the linguistic trends of the time, Bakhtin conceived of the utterance as a dialogical mode of communication between the speaker and the listener who are both actively participating in the communicative process.

While it is true that the utterance is a vehicle of individual expression for the speaker, the listener is vital in the formation of that utterance. When understanding takes place, it is through the direct communication of at least two participants. All true or real understanding is necessarily actively responsive. Through this give-and-take process a listener perceives and understands the meaning of what the speaker says and gives a response. This active response may



take on any of a number of different degrees and forms such as simple acknowledgment, vehement dissent, hearty concurrence, disbelief, etc.

Furthermore, in the communicative dynamic between the speaker and the listener, the speaker expects the listener to be, in some way, responsive. An utterance is always a response to a previous utterance. So that when A gives a response, B responds and, in turn, then A responds, and so on.

...[A]n utterance is never in itself originary:  
an utterance is always an answer. It is always  
an answer to another utterance that precedes it...  
(Bakhtin, 1981, p.60)

This need for another person to whom to respond takes the primacy away from the subject/speaker because without the listener there can be no dialogue. Dialogue establishes a kind of unity or bond between the participants through their active communication.<sup>4</sup>

Because the utterance is a social phenomenon, it occurs not in a vacuum but in specific contexts. Utterances take place among a wide variety of participants involved in richly diverse areas of life or "human activity".

...[T]he very individual manipulation of this social sign in a concrete utterance is wholly determined by social relations...The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine - and

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<sup>4</sup>Indeed, Bakhtin's writings are themselves dialogical in the sense that they are his responses to those who have addressed theories of language before him.

determine from within, so to speak - the structure of an utterance. (Volosinov<sup>5</sup>, 1973, p.86)

Utterances as a product or composite of human reality reflect a particular area or slice of life by its style, content and composition. What is said and how it is said are determined by the social factors unique to the participants. As Clark and Holquist note,

Instead of possessing a Leibnizian timelessness and a Cartesian logic, Bakhtin insists, language always partakes of the messiness of history and the vagaries of individual performance. Language is found not in a Platonic dream of order but in the hurly-burly, the give and take of speech in everyday life: 'The actual reality of language - speech - is not the abstract system of linguistic norms...and not the psychophysiological act

of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance.' (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p.221)

### **C. Function of utterance in dialogue**

As noted before, Bakhtin contends that speech analyzed in traditional linguistic terms such as sentences, syllables or phonemes is insufficient and leads to confusion in attempts to understand how communication operates. Alternatively, Bakhtin argues that utterances and their content and composition, tell us much more about communication. Dialogue is comprised of utterances and they

...have common structural features as units of speech communication and, above all, quite clear-cut boundaries. (Bakhtin, 1986, p.71)

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<sup>5</sup>Based on the research with which I am familiar, I hold the opinion that Bakhtin published two of his works under the name of his colleague, Valetin Volosinov, although this point remains controversial. In any event, the two often extensively collaborated and seemed to have shared a profound unity in their ideas.

In part, the utterance functions formally as a unit of speech that designates beginnings and ends in conversation. It acts as an indicator that allows for a change in the speaking subjects. The end of one speaker's utterance marks the beginning of another speaker's utterance. This facilitates dialogue by first yielding the floor to one speaker and then to the next. Each utterance is related to the next in that they are responses to each other. When the speaker has concluded all that s/he wishes to say and has finalized the utterance, there exists the possibility of response. Without this finalization, the utterance is incomplete; only to whole utterances can responses be given. Bakhtin points out that a whole utterance should not be confused with a grammatically complete sentence. Rather a whole utterance is one with a beginning and an end that allows for response.<sup>4</sup>

Less formally, yet most importantly, the function of the utterance in dialogue is as a vehicle of personal expression. The study of utterances, in turn, is significant because of what they reveal about the speaker. When analyzing communication through the utterance we glean expressive elements that cannot be obtained from the perspective of language as a system. Personal self-expression of the speaker comes through in the utterance. Bakhtin points out that, in

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<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed account of what constitutes a "whole utterance", see Bakhtin's Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, pp. 76-82

sharp contrast to the conception of the utterance as a speech unit, traditional linguistics erroneously reduces language to units which have no expressive content and provides no analysis of expressive intonations beyond semantics.

Through means of intonation, word choice, "side-long glances" "loopholes" and the context in which they are spoken, utterances express the attitudes and disposition of the speaker. This expressivity is important if we are to understand the speaker's attitude toward the topic of which s/he is speaking as well as toward the person/s addressed. Moreover, analysis of the dialogue through use of the utterance allows awareness of a person's prejudices, values and beliefs and recognition of the spheres of human activity in which s/he is involved politically, socially, and culturally. It reveals from what point of view a person speaks and sometimes how s/he should be spoken to. Utterances provide us with the social and historical content to understand the speaker and her/his words.

Our utterances are born in response to others' utterances. The way in which we speak is shaped by the speech genres available to us and the choices among them we make. Our expression of our thoughts and ideas cannot help but reflect their social nature and if we are to understand these expressions it must be in Bakhtinian terms which uncover what traditional linguistics cannot.

#### **D. Speech Genres**

Within each sphere of life speech genres or "relatively stable types of these utterances" develop. (Bakhtin, 1986, p.60) Some common speech genres include short rejoinders in daily conversation, military commands, commentaries, scientific statements and research, business writing and documents, and literary genres<sup>5</sup>.

Bakhtin places heavy emphasis on the fact that speech genres are incredibly heterogeneous. This high degree of heterogeneity arises from the numerous forms of human activity and within each sphere of activity lies an entire menu of speech genres which constantly grow and mutate. In fact, speech genres appear so dauntingly heterogeneous that they seem virtually impossible to analyze in any systematic way. However, Bakhtin argues that it is possible to classify speech genres into two separate types. It is through the analysis of these two types and the study of their interrelationship that we can better understand the utterance. Utterances are chosen in a sea of virtually unlimited contexts but are still analyzable in terms of their particular speech genres. Hence, more important than the words or signs themselves are the speech genres found in the dialogue. It is the speech genres that allow for meaning to be conveyed between two or more people.

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<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that literary genres is a sub-category of the category speech genres which includes both oral and written forms.

Bakhtin divides speech genres into primary (simple) and secondary (complex). Secondary speech genres are comprised of "artistic, scientific and sociopolitical" utterances found in commentaries, scientific research, philosophic journals, novels and the like. Primary speech genres are utterances commonly found, for example, in daily conversation and ordinary correspondence. Commonplace primary speech genres are more closely grounded in reality on a day-to-day basis and to the utterances of others in everyday life. The two are intertwined to the extent that the primary get integrated during the construction of the secondary. Because of this process, the primary genres are transformed and in this new capacity lose their immediacy or direct connection to reality. Their link to reality diminishes as they get twisted and mutated in the formation of secondary genres.

As Bakhtin notes, not all genres serve equally well for individual expression. While utterances can convey the uniqueness of the speaker, it is possible mainly in the artistic genres. Some genres work to rule out personal expression in the name of efficiency or discipline. Two such genres are military commands and business protocols. Bureaucratic institutions, for instance, with their triplicate forms and procedural hoop-jumping allow very little room for individual voice or expression. In fact, Bakhtin goes so far as to say that "...in the vast majority of speech genres... individual style doesn't enter into the intent of the

utterance,... but is one of its by-products." (Bakhtin, 1986, p.63) (emphasis mine).

Perhaps a conceptual sketch of exchanged utterances reflecting two different speech genres will serve to provide clarity on this point. Imagine a man and a woman engaged in a discussion about pornography.

SHE: "...Porno magazines encourage men to rape and torture women. This hurts all women because it sends a message to men that it is O.K. to rape and that women enjoy it."

HE: " Those women are paid. They receive economic compensation for their services...you can't prove they don't enjoy it."

SHE: " That doesn't mean other women don't suffer because of men who rape them as the magazine depicts!"

HE: " Where is your empirical data? You can't make such a claim without giving concrete statistics. Your whole supposition is fallacious!"

SHE: " How fallacious is it to assume that the woman who was brutally beaten and raped on campus last week because just such a scenario was graphically portrayed in this month's issue of 'Hot and Now'?"

HE: " You can't prove that, your inference is purely circumstantial..."

This example illustrate two participants in a dialogue making use of different speech genres. His is a secondary genre which relies on abstract and antiseptic words that could be associated with scientific investigation, business or academia. Hers is a primary genre reflecting ordinary daily parlance. His demand for "empirical data" and "concrete statistics" while claiming her argument is "purely circumstantial" obscures the very things which she is attempting to point out - the actual harm and violence done to

women. Even though they are talking about the same topic, their choices of vocabulary indicates their reliance on their respective genres. His is a dependence upon objective positivistic scientific categorizations. This suggests something about him. Namely, he is operating with an authoritative discourse<sup>6</sup> that presupposes a certain hierarchical order which subordinates the pain and degradation of women in favor of data. Data must first be obtained before any consideration can be made of his counterpart's claims about women's experience.

Bakhtin's notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse provide us with another dimension of dialogue between women and men where communication, taking place at the level of subject to subject, can go awry. In other words, even if dialogue between women and men has managed to get off the ground, it does not necessarily mean that it is unproblematic. While Bakhtin asserts that all exchanges have dialogic overtones or dialogic possibilities, he points out that within speech genres there are implicit appeals to authority being made. The upshot of authoritative discourse is that it closes down the possibility of dialogue. Authoritative discourse does not allow for the freeplay exchange of ideas nor does it welcome challenges to or interpretations of its authority. As Bakhtin writes,

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<sup>6</sup>A discussion of authoritative discourse will be brought out in Section II of this paper.



...[A]uthoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it...one must either totally affirm it or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority - with political power, an institution, a person..." (Bakhtin, 1981, p.343)

Speech genres that bear the stamp of authoritative discourse include religious doctrine, scientific truth and legal codes. Such discourse can be thought to be externally compelling. If one embraces authority or the authoritativeness of those claiming a particular discourse as such, one does not do so in virtue of any "power that it might have to persuade us internally..." (Bakhtin, 1981, p.342)

Diametrically opposed to authoritative discourse is Bakhtin's notion of internally persuasive discourse. The internally persuasive discourse is characterized by

...its unfinishedness and inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it. We have not yet learned from it all it might tell us; we can take it into new contexts, attach it to new material, put it in a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meaning...

Internally persuasive discourse allows for new information and contexts to modify meaning and does not have an unyielding grip on a single interpretation.

Keep in mind the example of the woman and man in a conversation about pornography. In this case, the man makes his claims by appealing to a form of authoritative discourse. On one level, he rests his argument that pornography has no negative effects on women on the need for all claims to be made in keeping with the scientific method. His need for her

to prove her argument with "empirical data", "concrete statistics" and his contention that her inference is "purely circumstantial" indicates his unquestioning acceptance of the scientific tenet that all claims about the world must be supported empirically. It is important to note here that his authoritative discourse is not internally persuasive. It does not give us any new insights into the practice of pornography, rather, it marks out a limitation of applying the scientific method. Nevertheless, its authority is uncontested in the mind of the speaker who uses it.

Through analyzing a potential subject-to-subject dialogue, it is clear that communication can break down on two levels: 1) by relying on secondary genres which obscure the topic at hand with abstract language and 2) by framing the problem in an authoritative discourse that allows for no real discussion of the topic at hand. The sample dialogue which has been considered herein sets forth two of the ways Bakhtin claims that the notion of speech genres help to clarify exactly what is taking place in communication in ways which an abstract objectivist's semantical analysis cannot provide.

## II. BELL HOOKS' USE OF DIALOGUE

Now let us again turn our attention to bell hooks. In "Feminist Focus on Men" hooks speaks of the absolute need she sees for women to use their voices to communicate to and confront men about the politics of oppression and domination in the patriarchal society in which we all live. She acknowledges the degree of difficulty in making oneself heard

and the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that are encountered when trying to do so. Nevertheless, she contends that this task is of the utmost importance. It is a necessary part of the rebellion against male domination. This vocalization by women must address women's experience of men as oppressors. Women's voices must be heard, understood and acknowledged by men.

At first, this may sound counter-intuitive. As hooks points out, the early wave of feminism and the consciousness-raising that occurred therein sought to exclude men so that women could better hear each other's voices and concerns. The talk of women. Women's talk. Unbridled and free from the watchful eye of fathers, husbands, brother's and lovers, women created

... a space for women to bear witness to the pain of exploitation and oppression in male-dominated society. (hooks, 1989, p.129)

And, as hooks also notes, this initial stage in the feminist movement was crucial. Crucial because this groundwork allows for all the ensuing stages of feminist work. This work provides a touchstone and creates a strong spiritual, emotional, and intellectual base from which to challenge the patriarchal world.

Yet, as hooks seems to want to note, it seems as if feminist women's efforts and work in so many diverse areas keeps slipping away. Gender discrimination and harassment still exist, violence by men against women increases, hate crimes against lesbian women continue, and reproductive

freedoms slip further and further away. Men seem content to plod along in their same old misogynist ways. A few make superficial concessions about being careful to change their habitual use of male pronouns, others rally for abortion rights while still others are convinced that feminists are nothing but "a bunch of man-hating dykes".

#### **A. Hooks' Next Step**

To overcome this, hooks believes that the next step, which seems to be somehow side-tracked, is the

...confrontation between women and men, the sharing of this new and radical speech. Women speaking to men in a liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p.129)

According to hooks, what this liberated voice requires is agency and women speaking as subjects instead of from the point of view of objects. Women refusing to be silent.

But what does this claim mean? Bearing this need to speak as subjects in mind, let us consider what a subject is as distinguished from an object. For hooks, silence is the mark of the object. Silence signifies

...exploitation, oppression, dehumanization. Silence is the condition of one who has been dominated, made an object. (hooks, 1989, p.139)

Conversely, a subject is one who speaks. Speech or talk indicates the free agency of the subject. It is through speech that we can "resist and rebel" against all forms of hegemonic thought. hooks contends that through speech, women give voice to their experiences and are empowered. Those who

Speak and break the barriers of silence are active as subjects. Those forced to remain in silence are objects.

### **B. Responses to Hooks**

While this subject-object distinction from hooks' perspective seems accurate, it is important to note two things: 1) that silence can be interpreted in other insightful ways, and 2) as we have already seen, simply voicing one's thoughts and experiences does not guarantee that subjecthood will be admitted. First, the issue of women's silence. One illuminating way of construing silence is in understanding that women's silence not only marks the woman-as-object but also acts as a red flag. According to Bakhtin, in a dialogic exchange such silences can command our attention. They invite our awareness of their presence. They are responses of a certain kind. But, to understand this point we must return to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical subject (self).

Broadly understood, the dialogical self is only a self insofar as it is situated in speech in relation to others. The existence of self is dependent in a specific sense on the existence of the other. The self cannot exist independently.

The Bakhtinian self is never whole, since it can exist only dialogically. It is not a substance or essence in its own right but exists only in a tensile relationship with all that is other and most important, with other selves. (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p.65)

In a dialogue, the person engaged in speaking is a subject. But in order for the dialogue to exist at all, there must be at least one other person involved - another subject or self. A speech act between the two subjects is only possible in

virtue of there being a speaker and a listener. So, when the speaker says something it is received by the listener. In this sense, even if the listener is virtually silent in response, s/he is still an active subject as listener, as a person or necessary other with whom the speaker communicates. Silence is not the passivity of an object, but rather an active non-response from a subject which itself carries nuances and implications that can be read or interpreted.

Furthermore, in addressing hook's assertion that speaking translates to being respected as a subject, I would argue that there could exist a dialogical object with no subjectivity whom the speaker-subject addresses. Consider the following example of a dialogue between a husband and wife seated in a cafe drinking cups of coffee and reading the local newspaper. The woman stares at the travel section quietly sipping her coffee while the man comments on the country's political state of affairs. She fantasizes about brushing up on her Swedish and moving, alone, to Stockholm. In her mind, she mentally notes the money necessary for such a venture and imagines various aspects of her new life there. Meanwhile, she listens half-heartedly to her husband prattling on and on while barely taking notice of her.

HE: "...sure, Clinton won the election but what now?..."

SHE: "...hmm..."

HE: "...I mean, do you think he can do any better with the U.S. than ol' Bushie boy?..."

SHE: "..."

HE: "...of course, I s'pose the Democrats are a better bet than another four years of Bush's dirty tricks. At least, Clinton's willing to step up to bat...seems to know what people want...like health care, oh,...and abortion..."

SHE: "...mmm..."

At first blush, this lop-sided exchange of utterances looks like a monologue or even a soliloquy. However, Bakhtin would consider this communication to have dialogic overtones. Examined through a Bakhtinian lens as a dialogue, the woman's virtual silence can be regarded as a "talking back". She is signifying not simply that she is dissatisfied with her present life-situation by using fantasy, but her responses to the man's political observations indicate to us some possibilities. Namely, it is possible that she is bored to death and uninterested in taking her usual part as audience in her husband's boorish behavior and really couldn't give two cents about hearing her husband's opinion. Plausibly understood in this way, her virtual silence does not indicate passivity and acceptance but, rather, a purposive distancing. This dialogue seems to give us grounds for concluding that the woman, in this case, is being treated as a dialogical object with no real subjectivity being acknowledged by the speaker.

This Bakhtinian perspective implies that hooks' conclusion that women have been treated as objects by their forced submission to be silent is a gross oversimplification of the problem. When conceived through Bakhtin's notion of subject-to-subject encounters, women's silence in dialogue is

an active response in the context of their own oppression. Interpreted as such, women's silence is deafening.

Bakhtin's stance on a subject-to-subject exchange enables a break from the traditional interpretations of women's silence as timidity, unresponsiveness or preoccupation. It allows an understanding of it as an active response to oppression. We can, on the one hand, accept such an example as a case of dialogue by Bakhtin's lights. After all, we have just interpreted the woman's silence as an active non-response to her husband's remarks. She acts as the respondent to whom he directs his comments. On the other hand, it is not at all apparent that the husband is taking his wife seriously as a subject except, perhaps, in the most rudimentary way (i.e, as the other to whom he is addressing). That is, it seems that she could just as easily be the woman behind the counter pulling down lattes, the anxious youth in the corner nervously stirring his espresso or the blind woman's seeing-eye dog lying below the next table.

We can also see that a new understanding of the impossibility of there being a monological subject, since dialogue requires another subject, does not preclude the possibility of uneven or lop-sided dialogues. In fact, chances are we encounter them on a daily basis.

The implication here is this. hooks prescribes dialogue as a means for women's emancipatory liberation from patriarchy. She claims that if women enter into subject-to-subject dialogue with men there can be an exchange that will



benefit women. However, as hooks claims, entering into a dialogue does not automatically ensure that women's subjecthood is respected. In this dramatization, the woman is theoretically the subject to which the husband speaks, yet, he does so with no apparent regard for her agency. Hence, hooks is wrong in blithely assuming that dialogue is the key element or next step in women's liberation. As in this case, women involved in dialogue with men often end up as sounding boards with their status as subjects recognized only to the extent that it makes it possible to claim conversation occurs. This does not mean that the speech act is inherently monological. We know this because when we do recognize the meaning of her silences, we can see that she is resisting as a subject.

Additionally, hooks suggests that one of the reasons that this next step of critically addressing the topic of men, and men themselves, has been avoided is because of a scar in our collective consciousness as women. Women of all races, classes, and sexual orientations have been repeatedly punished into keeping silent. While we are no longer keeping quiet amongst ourselves about the abuse, the oppression, and the humiliation and have begun to confront men about these issues, there is, according to hooks, a strange and eerie silence on the subject of men. hooks contends that the history of conditioning that has kept us silent has resulted in a feminism that reflects that conditioning. Hence, we do not easily or often voice our thoughts about men and even less often do we share these thoughts with men. And with good

reason. We fear losing the power we have reclaimed for ourselves. Because the very act of women speaking, "...carries embedded in that gesture a challenge, a threat to male domination." (hooks, 1989, p.128) we have spoken primarily amongst ourselves.

On this point, I hear many strong, indignant, beautiful feminist voices of friends, colleagues and past generations ringing in my head with objections to hooks. They entreat her to define just what it is we have been doing all along if not challenging our male oppressors. Haven't women created and published a wide array of feminist scholarly, literary and artistic works? Haven't we sought to destroy and re-define the gender straitjackets into which women and men have been stuffed? Hasn't the lesbian-separatist movement proved that we can and do flourish without men? Hearing these voices gives comfort and strength in knowing what women have been able to accomplish under the most grim and perilous social conditions.

Indeed, contrary to what hooks suggests there has been much critical discussion and feminist writing which addresses the experience of being male and the subsequent high cost of conventional masculinity. In fact, women have critically called into question issues of patriarchal oppression that defiantly break with this collective conditioning of which hooks speaks. Moreover, women have done so in ways which have sought to encourage men to reflect on their own experiences of

masculinity and to take part in critical dialogue about those experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, what seems to be the case is not as hooks has suggested, that women need to dare to engage in critical discussions with men about male oppression. Rather, what seems more plausible is that men have not taken such female-initiated dialogue seriously or that men themselves have not dared to engage in such dialogue. It is not as if women haven't made the effort to talk to men and engage them in dialogue as they do their feminist sisters. In small part, this effort to reach out to men has been somewhat successful at times; a point which hooks never acknowledges. What seems to be the problem is that men are extremely reluctant to take part in dialogue which forces them to critically examine and reflect upon their own lives and actions. If the husband in the previous illustration were concerned about his wife as a subject, he would try to understand the cause of her silence rather than just blathering on. But, really investing her with all the qualities of subjecthood would require him to change his thinking and behavior.

I do not now wish to deny that hooks is on target when she states that it is imperative

...that the exploited and oppressed speak to and among ourselves, but it is equally essential that we

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<sup>7</sup>For those interested in this work, I recommend reading Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, 1978; John Stoltenberg's Refusing to be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice, 1989; and Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change, 1987.

address without fear those who exploit, oppress and dominate us. If women remain unable to speak to and about men in a feminist voice then our challenge to male domination on other fronts is seriously undermined. (hooks, 1989, p.130)

It is my contention, and I believe it is also hooks', that it is possible for women and men to engage in dialogue in which we can communicate with each other about the ways in which the politics of the domination of women harms women and is, as a result, detrimental to both women and men. This is an important step in men's recognition that by perpetuating the ideologies and practices that subjugate women they hurt themselves as well. When men finally recognize this fact then they can work to end violence against women as a way of preserving themselves.

Implicit in this line of argument is how women and men as subjects define themselves against one another. The feminist movement came about because women were suffering at the hands of men in male dominated societies. Women found themselves in relation to men as the objects of physical and mental violence of terrifying proportions. Women were and are treated as objects by men who, through their "arrogant eyes"<sup>8</sup>, see this objectification as appropriate and just.

As hooks herself has claimed, the proper role for women brought up in a patriarchal system of language is one of silence.

...the punishments for these acts of speech seemed endless. They were intended to silence me - the child

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<sup>8</sup>Phrase due to Marilyn Frye - The Politics of Reality, 1983.

and more particularly the girl child...The punishments I received for 'talking back' were intended to suppress all possibility that I would create my own speech. (hooks, 1989, p.6)

Patriarchy as a form of domination is a monological system. It seeks to have only one subject or authority figure (man) and insists on the silence and complicity of all others (woman).

If men continue to view women from the perspective of a monological subject, (i.e., independent from women and the violence done to them) they are not likely to see any impetus for change. On an even more profound level, men engaged in a critical dialogue with women about patriarchal oppression can come to hear something new. By participating in subject to subject dialogue, sometimes silently and sometimes vocally, they begin to hear in their own voices the voices of the women with whom they talk. To Bakhtin this is only natural.

The speech act by nature is social. The word is not a tangible object, but an always shifting, always changing means of social communication. It never rests with one consciousness, one voice. Its dynamism consists in movement from speaker to speaker, from one context to another, from one generation to another. Through it all the word does not forget its path of transfer and cannot completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered. (Voloshinov, 1973, p.199)

Women's and men's social realities may be vastly different but they are defined against and in relation to each other. When engaged in dialogue men can realize their interconnections with women. Men's voices name certain perceptions or experiences of reality. Those perceptions are interdependent with the experiences of women. As such, women's experiences

give definition to men's reality. When this interconnected subjectivity is had, men can understand that the violence and humiliation women suffer at the hands of men who rape and abuse is not done to nameless objects but to real flesh and blood women like their sisters, daughters, mothers and lovers.

However, I am more conservative in what I believe can be achieved by critical dialogue. When we speak to men in a dialogue between subjects we can achieve at least two goals. First, we break free from the silence that hooks sees as the trademark of the objectified. This is important from hooks' vantage point because it lets men know that women will no longer tolerate being addressed as objects. Women are ready to engage in transformations of male-female interactions and we loudly and defiantly proclaim as much when we reclaim our own subjectivity. We have also seen the limitations of hooks' victory on this front.

The second goal is at a deeper level. When women and men and recognize themselves as subjects speaking to other subjects, both can take into account each other's situatedness as speakers and the "addressivity" of one's own utterances. That is, any topic or specific experience we choose to give expression to through an utterance occurs within overlapping social contexts resulting from both the speaker-as-subject and the listener-as-subject. Bakhtin puts it this way

...even the most primitive human utterance produced by the individual organism is, from the point of view of its content, import, and meaning, organized outside the organism, in the extra organismic conditions of social milieu. Utterance as such is wholly a product

of social interaction, both of the immediate sort as determined by the circumstances of the discourse, and of the more general kind, as determined by the whole aggregate of conditions under which any given community of speakers operates. (Voloshinov, 1973, p.93)

Notice here that this endeavor is not a one-way street. Men must be willing to acknowledge women as subjects. If this acknowledgement does not occur, there is, little hope of forcing such recognition. This is a point which hooks fails to consider. In fact, feminist women are ready to engage in critical discussion and have been doing so amongst ourselves for a long time. Also, we recognize ourselves as subjects whether men do or not. But no matter how much we boldly challenge male domination through critical dialogue, we only partially succeed unless we are taken seriously as subjects and not as dialogical objects without subjectivity by men.

As Bakhtin realizes, the significance of taking into account the listener-subject's positionality in the social world is in interpreting the response. The significance of taking into account the speaker-subject's positionality in the social world is in interpreting the statement or question. To put it somewhat colloquially, when women and men can engage in a dialogue between subjects, each has a better understanding or comprehension of where the other person is coming from.

By understanding each other's location in the genres of patriarchy, we better know her/his experience. By understanding this experience, we can more effectively communicate our own ideas in a way we feel is understandable. We can choose our words from the vast repertoire of utterances

and speech genres available to us in ways that acknowledge specific social conditions while simultaneously engaging in feminist critical thought. Once we are aware of the particular situatedness of a particular person and of the conditions in which this location arises, we can speak to it and to her/him from our own unique vantage point, subject to subject.

### III. CONCLUSORY REMARKS

hooks writes that creating contexts within which to carry out critical dialogue requires strategy. Women who embrace feminism are often willing to share their revelations, ideas and opinions with certain men in their lives. But many women rightly feel that such sharing can only take place with other women. The result is a kind of double-life or double-consciousness: being female-identified, intellectually nurtured and respected with other feminist women and simultaneously feeling like these feminist thoughts and ideals cannot be expressed in the company of men. As a result, many women fall into silence in the presence of men. Not wanting to experience the familiar humiliation or frustration brought about by male disapproval, they keep their feminist discussions to themselves.

Male domination seeks to suppress women talking critically about men. It is true that women do address men in feminist theory. Women still talk critically about men and have been for years. Women's talk, speaking out, and finding a voice all empower women in their realization that they are



not alone nor crazy in recognizing the pain attached to their exploitation and oppression. To that end, scholarly acceptance and recognition of work on masculinity by women and men is essential. This recognition by feminist colleagues provides another arena or genre within which to constructively critique and confront masculinity.

But, are there spaces outside of academic journals and colloquium panels for such dialogue to take place? Inspired by the work of Paulo Friere and his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed<sup>9</sup>, hooks optimistically seeks to create such spaces for dialogue - critical dialogue about men between women and men; subject to subject. hooks also notes that men must be educated about male domination and develop a critical consciousness even though most in society do not reward them for doing so. Women too are discouraged by patriarchy from discovering and examining the often painful reality of their own manipulated lives. Yet, many, many women embark on such a journey with an eye toward positive change for all women. hooks believes that men have the same potential. And this potential must be developed as long as we live with men in the capacities of daughter, sister, lover, aunt and mother. By way of qualification, I would add that men must seek to actively realize that potential and educate themselves if relationships between men and women are to be transformed.

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<sup>9</sup>This work is Friere's critical text in the philosophy of education.

As hooks notes, we must learn through and by the experiences that other women have had in trying to initiate and engage in such dialogues. Lesbian mothers and daughters, bi-sexual and heterosexual lovers, professional and non-professional women in the workplace have all struggled at different times, in different ways and with different degrees of success to partake in constructive dialogue which communicates feminist ideals, ways of thinking and a need for the end of the politics of male domination. Learning how one might go about sharing a feminist perspective with a genuinely interested or receptive or even unsuspecting boy or man is useful to know. It is helpful for all women who cannot find the words or the courage to share their feminist perspectives with the men they care about, work with and interact. While it is not the job of women to teach men about feminism, for hooks it is important to approach and partake in dialogue in ways that foster understanding of feminism rather than crush the potential that exists for such dialogue.

One space or genre that hooks envisions for such dialogue is the classroom. She remarks that many female teachers and professors have been reticent to express their own feminist perspective or interpretation among their colleagues, on committees and, most importantly, among their students.

...[F]eminist women professors are often reluctant to discuss masculinity critically, or the ways in which sexism seriously limits men, or we raise these issues in ways that alienate, that convey ridicule, contempt, or own uncertainty. Feminist scholars must be a vanguard, mapping out a terrain where women can speak to

and about men in ways that challenge but do not diminish.  
(hooks, 1989, p.132)

This "terrain" that hooks advocates can be thought of as a setting for particular speech genres. The classroom in an ideal location for an exchange of utterances drawn from a heterogeneity of genres. It is a special place wherein women and men can address the topic of male oppression of women in critically reflective dialogue. As such, neither women nor men leave behind the life experiences and points of view which work to comprise their personal identities. Rather, they can address and listen to each other, subject to subject, about their perceptions of patriarchal oppression from their own vantage points.

When invoking the notion of classroom as a setting of dialogical speech genres, what may leap to mind is a space within elite ivy covered walls. So conceived, dialogue seems aimed toward privileged white academia. However, it is important to remember that classroom sites are not necessarily confined to prestigious liberal arts schools which can afford to offer Women's Studies classes. Rather, classroom environments take on various shapes, sizes and purposes. Carving out a space for such exchange of critical ideas can be done in a variety of ways across a wide spectrum of classroom situations. Some such likely sites include elementary and secondary schools, vocational schools, public universities, community colleges, community-based language classes, continuing education programs and the workplace. All of these

can serve as contexts within which teachers, professors, instructors and teaching assistants can initiate and moderate dialogue between class participants about men's and women's experience of patriarchy.

An illustrative sketch of a complex problem and one way it can be approached dialogically is useful. Many people find themselves, at some point, in a humanities class, either in high school or at a higher level of education. There is considerable work being done to expand the traditional canon of literature studied in such classes to include works which represent diverse walks of life. Unfortunately, many schools make only token gestures toward this aim or place such a goal on the back burner. One fruitful way of getting around required texts by "white guys", dead or alive, is to critically call these works into question. Initiating conversation with classes about why they are chosen for study, who chooses them, and the representation of women in them can provide a touchstone from which to critically explore one dimension of men's relation to the patriarchy which oppresses women.

What we gain "by a politics that resists domination" is our fulfillment and our liberation in taking part in subject-to-subject interaction with all people. Feminists have resisted and sought to demolish the objectification of women and have worked to reclaim their own subjectivity. One way of resisting male domination is through dialogue.

In this paper I have shown that we can gain a useful, although not fully explanatory, account of problematic

communication between women and men by examining the notion of dialogue. Both hooks and Bakhtin offer illuminating insights into dialogue which can serve as stepping stones toward the possibilities of liberation. We have seen limitations of hooks' account of dialogue. Namely, that when one enters into a dialogue with men one is not automatically guaranteed of being respected and addressed as a subject. As Bakhtin, in fact, notes, one may be put into a position in which one's subjectivity is acknowledged only in so far as needed by the speaker. But, even in these cases, Bakhtin urges consideration of the dialogic overtones at work so that what is really taking place "behind the scenes" can be brought to light.

One way of resisting male domination is through critical dialogue with each other and with men. Indeed, as hooks claims, dialogue can be an important liberatory tool. Bakhtin's theory of language which highlights such dialogue can serve to provide us with insights in seeing how the project hooks calls for has specific limitations which must be taken into consideration and overcome by those seeking to carry it out. That is, not until men interact in the kind of dialogue that reflects subject-to-subject interaction, one in which men acknowledge and seek to diminish their own position of power as a dominating subject, can it be liberatory in the ways that both thinkers envision.

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