

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda A. Bell, David Blumenfeld. *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8030-6; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8031-3.

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Twelve of the seventeen essays in this collection were originally prepared for a conference (“Racism and Sexism: Differences and Connections”) sponsored by the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State University in the Spring of 1992. The five additional essays add to the volume’s breadth and provide important background for the conversation developed at the conference. Several of the contributors (Kwame Anthony Appiah, Lucius Outlaw, Marilyn Frye, Claudia Card, and Maria Lugones) are among the best known and most influential participants in contemporary philosophical discussion of racism and sexism. Taken together, the essays make a substantial contribution to understanding not only the two “isms” of the title but also ways in which they are connected and ways in which they might be overcome. The book is an excellent example of *engaged* scholarship that is an academic contribution to the transformation of popular culture.

Co-editor Linda Bell’s introduction is a concise and helpful road map to the collection that contributes to its potential as a classroom text. She begins with an historical overview of connections between racism and sexism spun out of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 “ain’t I a woman?” speech, then continues with a synopsis of the essays that organizes them into a coherent conversation.

The book is divided into four parts: Overview, Racism and Sexism- -Theoretical Considerations, Pain and Anger-Practical Outgrowths, and Where Do We Go From Here?

Part Two, the “theoretical” section, accounts for almost half of the book—not surprising, perhaps, for a collection of essays in philosophy! But, as has been noted before, there is nothing more practical than a good the-

ory. Appiah and Outlaw ground the theoretical section in W.E.B. DuBois, and Stephen Prothero grounds DuBois in the practice of “the conjure woman . . . from western Nigeria or Benin who uses otherwise dangerous herbs or roots to heal.” That image of using dangerous things for healing purposes is an integral part of the discussion of the meaning of “white” that is developed by Marilyn Frye, Victoria Davion, and Claudia Card. The theoretical section concludes with two essays that discuss power, trust, and evil. If practicality is a mark of good theorizing, this theoretical section is most certainly good. It addresses problems of identity and systemic oppression that have proven particularly difficult in anti-racist and anti-sexist coalition building, and it addresses them in ways that are both academically sound and popularly accessible.

That the other parts are shorter than the theoretical section does not make them less important. The three essays in Part One lay a strong foundation for the theoretical section, particularly by way of Bernita Berry’s exercises in learning the effects of racism and sexism and Marsha Houston’s pithy account of why dialogues between Black women and White women are difficult, included as an appendix to Berry’s essay. Parts Three and Four draw inspiration from experiences of anger discussed by (among others) Audre Lorde. Maria Lugones and Bernadette Hartfield together make a compelling case for movement from recognizing ways in which anger has been hard for oppressed people to handle to making the anger of oppressed people hard for oppressors to handle. The book concludes with a discussion of position as it relates to resistance. In this regard, Linda Martin Alcoff’s discussion of the problem of speaking for others, though a practical response to the question “where do we go from here?”, is also an important con-

tribution to the theoretical discussion developed in Part Two. She expands the theoretical base from DuBois, Frye, and Lorde to include Trinh T. Minh-ha and the growing body of anthropologists turning an increasingly critical eye on colonial and racist dimensions of anthropological practice.

Though there is no general bibliography, individual essays include extensive references that point readers to a wealth of current scholarship and historical resources. The references go beyond philosophy to include a wide range of social scientific and literary texts as well as le-

gal theory that will be of particular interest to scholars of popular culture. The book is really quite remarkable for the breadth of material it manages to include in a relatively brief volume.

*Overcoming Racism and Sexism* is an excellent and accessible way to introduce students (both inside and outside the academy) to the intricate and politically significant relationships of ethnicity, gender, and race that have played (and continue to play) a central role in the construction of "American" culture in the experience of the United States. I heartily recommend it.

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