



## What Can We Learn From Black Feminist Thought?

A Review of

*Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working With Audre Lorde*

by Surya Nayak

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*Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working With Audre Lorde* is not about Audre Lorde. Instead, with this book, Surya Nayak applies insights, methodologies, and theories of various pioneering Black feminists via the brilliance of Lorde's work. It is a compendium of sorts, illustrating numerous theories, methodologies, and struggles relevant to Black women. Even the definition of "Black" is not what some readers, particularly those in the United States, will expect; its focus being not on the African diaspora but on "Black" as "a political term which includes all oppressed ethnic groups" (Parmar & Kay, 2004, as cited on p. 23).

Nayak offers readers a book that is simultaneously theoretical and conversational, personal and political. Nayak's tone is that of an educated friend, both intense and personal at the same time, especially in the chapter focused on intersectionality, where Nayak shares more personal stories. This style is very similar to Lorde, who "dismantles the boundaries that are set up between the personal and the political, and, in doing so. . . opens up critical alternatives for social change that build on a long and enduring Black feminist literary tradition" (p. 19). At the same time, Nayak firmly believes in theory's ability to "provide emotional, intellectual and spiritual containment" (p. 122) for distress caused by multiple layers of oppression, and the beauty of Black feminist theory is its contextualization in the lives of real people (e.g., pp. 6, 32, 129). The book is truly worthy of inclusion in the Routledge's Concepts for Critical Psychology: Disciplinary Boundaries Re-thought series. Nayak's ability to transgress theoretical boundaries is impressive and something that she explains is "a particular 'critical' tendency of the activism of Black feminist theory" (p. 7) and her role as "host" (p. 18). Nayak admits that this is a monumental task and that she may have "fallen into the dangerous trap of the dialectic" (p. 117).

An incredible number of citations are provided throughout the book's five chapters, sometimes resulting in dense passages that resemble literary theory (e.g., Chapter 2). It demonstrates the plethora of available work by women of color feminists (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Collins, 1998, 2000; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Espin, 1995; hooks, 1982, 1984, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Landrine, 1995; Mohanty, 2003; Moya, 2001). This also illustrates "the ways in which Black women as writers, academics, teachers, who live lives of multiple oppression, still end up paradoxically unintelligible to those who are unschooled in critical discourses and also to those who are" (Boyce Davies, 1994, as cited on p. 33), given that the insights offered from these feminists are so often ignored in feminism and psychology (Espin, 1995).

The book is also psychological, truly demonstrating an intersectional approach (e.g., Chapter 4) and exposing critical psychology's failure "to describe and define difference and the complex nature of oppression" (Byrd, Cole, & Guy-Sheftall, 2009, as cited on p. 21) or consider "post-colonial thinking" (p. 2) in general. Nayak uses Lorde and Fanon to discuss the ways in which "racism shapes our identity and makes us all racist subjects" (p. 51) in ways that "ha[ve] nothing and everything to do with the colour of skin" (p. 51) and how it is easier to deal with external forces of racism, sexism, and homophobia than internalized beliefs (p. 93). She beautifully describes the ways in which "Lorde's work is primarily focused on the tribulations of relating across difference and transgressing externally imposed ideological, structural, emotional and psychic borders used to separate, distort and fragment" (p. 91).

For a text of just 156 pages, *Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory* is astonishingly useful as a reference manual, textbook, or activist guide, or can even seem like an understanding friend. Instead of focusing on what was written in the past by Lorde and so many others, Nayak has brought their work to the applied disciplines (p. 11) so that these individuals may help "real" people, instead of remaining only in academic circles (e.g., Chapter 3). This makes the book an indispensable guide for anyone interested in working with the oppressed and underserved, as a feminist version of Dalal's *Race, Colour and the Process of Racialization: New Perspectives From Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis, and Sociology* (2002) that lies somewhere between the extremely personal *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984) and the highly theoretical *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Sandoval, 2000).

Nayak makes it clear that psychology continues to be created within and ultimately maintains a global, racialized, majority culture and that it can benefit from a true understanding of subjectivity and all those elements that affect people (Espin, 1995; Moya, 2001). She makes the point that "the success of political coalitions, collaborative-working, alliances and bridge-building for liberation is dependent upon, and in direct correlation to, our, my and your capacity to be in the 'borderland' of self" (p. 115). In other words, we can all learn something from Black feminist thought.

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