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Postmodernism:

A.
hooks’s definition of postmodernism, general overview/background

“hooks asks why African Americans should have any interest in ‘postmodern theory.’ She applies this label to the philosophic critique of modernity that celebrates difference and otherness, that advocates radical liberation and political equality, that finds fault with rigid concepts of identity, and that criticizes so-called master narratives.” (Leitch 2476)

“Radical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a ‘politics of difference,’ should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people.” (hooks 2480)

“If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of ‘authority’ as ‘mastery over’ must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter.” (hooks 2480)

“The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy – ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition.” (hooks 2481)

B.
Problems with aligning postmodern theory with the art/literature of marginalized groups, traditional objections to the two movements aligning, postmodernism as exclusionary

“Despite its invocation of ‘difference,’ she argues, postmodernism is exclusionary” (Leitch 2476)

“it seems unwilling to engage the experiences of writings of the truly marginalized – black women, for example” (Leitch 2476)

“The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking must be continually interrogated.” (hooks 2478)

“My defense of postmodernism and its relevance to black folks sounded good, but I worried that I lacked conviction, largely because I approach the subject cautiously and with suspicion.” (hooks 2478)

“Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the ‘subject’ when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?” (hooks 2482)
C. Defining identity within the black community, her identification of problems and musings on possible solutions

“African Americans… need to resist outmoded notions of essential blackness in much the same way as feminist critics have contested the idea of the essentially female” (Leitch 2477)

“hooks is critical of the concept of essential blackness whether imposed from without as racist stereotype or from within as prescription for an ‘authentic black identity,’ an identity that refuses to recognize the multiplicities of black experiences that ground ‘diverse cultural productions’.” (Leitch 2477)

“We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.” (hooks 2482)

“Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism.” (hooks 2482)

“Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory.” (hooks 2482-2483)

D. Her stated solutions for the problem of merging postmodernism with a black identity to create a “postmodern blackness”

“[She] is not willing to abandon postmodernism to the intellectual elites” (Leitch 2476-2477)

“hooks’s solution is to embrace the postmodern critique of essentialism while emphasizing the traditional humanistic ‘authority of experience’.” (Leitch 2477)

“She suggests that it is in the gaps, ruptures, and contradiction of Western master narratives that the strategies for liberation and for coalition politics will discover effective forms of resistance and new forms of community” (Leitch 2477)

“Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding.” (hooks 2484)

“It’s exciting to think, write, talk about, and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may very well be the central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur.” (hooks 2484)

Feminism:

A. In addition to having strong views about postmodernism, as well as strong internal conflicts about the same idea, bell hooks is also known as a passionate feminist. In her
book *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* she details her belief that the feminist movement excludes black women, much as she argues that the postmodern movement excludes minorities and particularly black women. In the book bell hooks argues that black women are the lowest group, the “mule of the world” as put forth in the novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God” (Hurston 14). She additionally points to works and beliefs that seem to paint black women as inferior, of lower class and as harsh taskmasters who effectively drive away the men in their lives. According to bell hooks black women must not only fight for basic rights as a woman but must fight for the right to be considered women in the first place as opposed to some entirely different class, uncategorized but not affiliated with white women, or even black men, and thereby not worthy of the same status and equal rights.

B. In an essay entitled *Black is a Woman’s Color* and published in the literary journal *Callaloo* bell hooks lays this idea out as well as her own inner conflict as to what exactly should be done about the inequality she sees within the feminist movement. According to bell hooks in this essay a young black child, whether or not the child is her is never expressly stated, claims that young black girls are taught that the closer one’s hair is to a white person’s hair the nicer and more beautiful it is (hooks, 382). She then goes further and talks about the idea that having their hair pressed or braided is a rite of passage that signifies the move from childhood into adulthood and that all the little girls felt like women once they had preformed this rite which, according to bell hooks, ironically is a rite forcing them to look more white.

Bell hooks discusses further the pain of changing the hair, in terms of it burning ears or being braided to tight and hurting, but the strong desire to do it because it would allow one to be viewed as a woman. She then ties it into her overall experience that even with this rite achieved the little girl then goes out into the world and is viewed as not being a woman due to her skin color and is therefore not awarded the same rights and equality as white women. In the essay the girl spoken about reaches high school and never wants to get her hair pressed again as “it is no longer a rite of passage, a chance to be intimate in the world of women” (383). In other words she has finally discovered that no matter how much she changes her outward appearance she will always be viewed as black and not allowed into the world of feminism or the white woman’s world as she sees it.

C. In this same article bell hooks also shows not so much a confusion as a question of what she believes black women should do about their lack of inclusion in the feminist movement. Much as with postmodernism she recognizes the exclusion but does not necessarily feel that fighting to join in is the right way to go. Once the girl in her essay realizes she will not be included by virtue of changing her hair she decides to have a “natural afro” and become as individualized as possible and stand out completely rather than attempt to join in somewhere she sees herself as not being wanted. Throughout the rest of the essay she sets up dramatic dichotomies and outright contradictions of ideas. At one point the girl in the essay is informed she is an old woman for wanting to speak her mind and be an individual, a trait praised in a feminist but rejected in her for she is a young girl. Later in the same passage she is told she is not allowed to wear black for it is a woman’s color and, again, she is a girl (384). The question then of course is what is it?
Is she a girl or child? Is black a woman’s color or is it not? This question illuminates the question in bell hooks of exactly what it is that seems to be holding back the progress of black women. Even in her book about feminism she mentions a few times the belief that it is not just color but class, stereotypes and even other older influences causing black women to be held back while white women, and even black men, are allowed to advance.

In the last scene of the essay bell hooks drives home her point where the main character has a dream in which a man kills his wife and daughter and is then forgiven by virtue of his wife being considered wild and his daughter rebellious. This scene is somewhat confusing in itself because it moves from the idea that white women refuse to acknowledge black women as women to an idea that men are given more leniency than women. It is interesting that in the dream the man in question is never identified as white or black though possibly the implication is that he is the main character’s own father and therefore black. Again, and as with her thoughts on postmodernism, it suggests a confusion as to what exactly the biggest problem is in the area of feminism or what the biggest issue is that black women must fight against. Is it the overall idea of men and women or is it the idea of black women and white women or is it white women and minority and, once the answer to that question is found, do black women even want to be a part of the feminist movement or would they be better served finding their own individual way?

Application:
The ideas put forth by bell hooks on postmodernism and feminism both relate directly to the novels Their Eyes Were Watching God and Jazz. In both novels the stories revolve around a search for meaning, a modernist thought, only to be unsure if it’s really found at the end, a postmodern view in other words. Joe wants to know who is mother is believing it will bring him a sense of who he is but never finds the answer while Dorcas believes she has found her answer with Acton only to die before that answer is fully realized. Meanwhile Golden Gray does find where his own meaning with Wild but the end of his story is never given leaving a question as to what ultimately happened. Is the story then modern or postmodern? Both ideas are there but there is a dichotomy over which one the story is and this ties in directly to the confusion in bell hooks over whether or not black literature is modern or postmodern and what it should even be striving for in the first place.

The application of hooks’s solution for the postmodern problem is not evident in Jazz, in which Morrison if effectively utilizing popular culture to make her art more accessible in a postmodern world. hooks’s explanation of how rap music has created a new medium of expression within the black community is effectively paralleled through the medium of literature by Morrison’s adept adaptation of popular culture into a literary format. This novel may well be an embodiment of hooks’s expressed ideology.

Likewise the idea of feminism is present in both books. Janie struggles to find herself and her own happiness in the face of others around her trying to push their own expectations on her. In both works the women struggle to find themselves and their own place in the world while the men are often seemingly given easier times as they are allowed to work and live their own lives. Even in situations where men are shown as abusive, or murders in Joe’s case, they are not punished for it while a woman in a similar situation is seen in a more shocking light such as Violet being known as Violent for
attacking a corpse while Joe really faces no repercussions at all in spite of a number of people knowing he murdered Doreas.