



The Lit Review Podcast

English Transcript

Episode Number: 58

Guest/Topic: Stacy Davis Gates on *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*
by bell hooks

Originally Recorded: May 7, 2021

Episode Release Date: March 20, 2022

Episode Length: 58:17

Monica Trinidad:

Hi everyone, we're back with another season of the Lit Review podcast! I'm one of your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad, and wow, it feels good to be back. This was the first time we've done season promotion online before releasing our episodes and I did not realize how much I needed that energy and excitement from folks! How are you doing, Page? It's so good to see you!

Page May:

I'm okay! It's so good to see you and to be back in this wonderful space of books and beautiful powerful people. I'm good, as the sun gets longer, my mood gets brighter and brighter, so I am doing great. How have you been? How are you doing today?

Monica Trinidad:

I'm doing good, also happy about the extra minutes of sunshine adding up everyday, my brain is very thankful. So I was just telling a friend that it's taken us almost a year to produce and release this season, but that you and I decided that we needed to move at a pace that felt doable as we navigated pandemic life, capacity shifts, and just really trying to take better care of ourselves. That same friend reminded me that either way, these conversations are timeless. Still, when we recorded this episode with Stacy in the spring of 2021, bell hooks was still on this earth, and you and I were excited to finally have a guest choose one of her books to discuss on the podcast. And for those listening who aren't familiar with bell hooks, well today is a good day to learn about how significant she was and is to so many people. bell hooks was a prolific Black feminist poet, scholar and critic, who left us with over 30 books to study and fall in love with on Black feminism, radical education, cultural work, intersectionality, love, and liberation. So much knowledge.

I want to say what I loved about this conversation with Stacy, but first, and this is relevant – this podcast, and the conversations we make space for, allow us to see each other horizontally, or in other words, gives many organizers, who are often sort of flatly defined by the work that they do or the things that they say, space to share stories they don't get a chance to share on the panels or the keynotes or the rally speeches. We get to hear how a book might've served as a tool in building community through, or how a book sparked their entry into movement work, or they get to be really honest and nerdy about a book that really shaped their politics and their life. And so in this episode with Stacy, who joined us over Zoom from her living room with her beautiful family passing in the background every so often, she talks about a book that she says took her world as she was experiencing it and put it into a tangible, historical context. Stacy breaks down what it's been like to be a Black woman teaching in a place like Chicago and why she's unapologetically always taking up space fueled by the powerful words of bell hooks. But I want to hear all of your thoughts about this episode, Page! What stuck out for you almost a year later from recording?

Page May:

I loved this episode! Getting to record it was such an honor and a privilege. It stirred up a lot of memories for me. I think it is such a perfect episode to be starting with, in honor of bell hooks, and also because this episode speaks so clearly and beautifully, Stacy was able to talk about the importance of 'Okay, now that you have this information, what are you going to do with it?' And hearing her talk about her process in a moment in her life where she was reading a book that helped her to name herself and to see herself. And then to finish that book and feel compelled and called to do something with this new affirmation. She's not just, settle on 'great now I feel better about myself,' but also 'how do I make this a part of who I am? So that others may be who they are more easily?' So that really struck me and what that looked like as a classroom teacher was really powerful and personally relevant for me.

Then the moment that we were recording it, and even more so now, has been for me, a year of a lot of change and a lot of transformation. And there's been a lot of processing that I've been trying to doing. And thinking about my life and my work within organizing spaces and what my experience has been as a Black woman. I mean it's been hard. And I have a lot of anger and rage and sadness.

And what Stacy spoke to, and what this book does, it really shares that that's not not new, and it's not just you and you're not making it up and you're not just in your head, right? And I remember having that moment, several times, we learn these things over and over and over, life shows us these lessons, but for me it was Audre Lorde, was one the first times I saw myself, and saw the uses of my anger. But I needed this conversation with Stacy at that time in my life. Of just a person, that you see her as someone she seems so strong and fearless and she always has the

right answer, but to hear that she too struggles and that anyone could ever sit in a room and feel that power and do nothing but “What do you think Stacy? Okay let's do that.’ That’s unbelievable to me! Hearing her talk about her own process of self-affirmation and finding that within bell hooks writing was also affirming for me and I hope it has made me a more affirming teacher and friend and all the things. And so it's a really beautiful episode and yeah, Stacy is just amazing. I’m so stoked that we’re just putting it out.

Monica Trinidad:

Stacy is amazing and the word that kept coming to mind as you were sharing your thoughts was vulnerability. It’s one of my new favorite things. I blame Brene Brown. But anyway, I love that Stacy not only gets vulnerable and goes into her own process of self-affirmation, but she also makes it very clear that if we’re actually going to dismantle patriarchy, we have to acknowledge and heed the leadership of Black women, and white people and white passing people, of all genders, continue to struggle with that today. And Stacy is saying enough is enough. Alright Page, tell everyone a little bit more about the magic of Stacy Davis Gates and also the book we’re talking about today!

Page May:

So the book is *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks which came out in 1981, and the fabulous guest that we have talking about it is, none other, if you haven't peeped it yet, Stacy Davis Gates. The one and only, the Vice President of the Chicago Teachers Union and the Executive Vice President of the Illinois Federation of Teachers. If folks don't also know, I think it's important to lift up though: Her official bio, I thought this is really significant, it says she's on a temporary leave, I think it's how it's framed, from the classroom, and she really – she spent over 10 years teaching as a high school social studies teacher in Englewood. She's also the chair of United Working Families, which is a really wonderful organization here in Chicago. She's a mama of three gorgeous children and she is one of the most brilliant strategists that I have ever had the pleasure of not only just learning from but getting to talk with and strategize with. She's an extremely generous mentor and coach to a lot of campaigns and organizers throughout the city, and she does that with no credit, it's more work on her already extremely, extremely full plate, and it's a real wonderful privilege that we get to hear her share some of her life and her thoughts and her reflections about this book today for about an hour! And with that, let's just get into it. I hope that you all enjoy this one.

[INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]

Monica: You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Mariame Kaba voiceover: *"I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against."*

Protesters Chanting: *"CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"*

Page voiceover: *"We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

Young person voiceover: *"I remember, she was shot by my house -"*

Mariame voiceover: *"In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."*

[Music Lyrics] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is a house, a generation filled in Audy homes..."

[Music Fades]

[INTRO ENDS]

Page May:

Hello, hello, everyone, and thank you for listening today. I am so happy because it has been such a long minute since I've gotten to see my co-host even over Zoom. And today, we've got a really, really special guest, and when I say special, I mean a hella badass organizer, a brilliant strategist, and a very, very, very busy person. Stacy, thank you for being here and for real, for making time to talk with us today. How are you doing?

Stacy Davis Gates:

First off, thank you for having me. I am really honored to share this space with you. And how am I doing? I am seeing sunshine again. So it feels good to be alive, to see the sun shining again, and to see the positivity numbers from the coronavirus go down. Those things are very helpful, and so I'm feeling pretty good.

Page May:

I feel that. My spirit these days is getting a much needed boost.

Page May:

Yeah, thank you to the sun. Well, we shared in our intro earlier a little bit more of your bio and we're highlighting your role as VP of the Chicago Teachers Union. But in your own words, can you tell us more about who you are, what you do and why?

Stacy Davis Gates:

Wow, that's a big question. Who am I? I'm a mom, I'm a daughter, I'm a wife, I'm a niece, I'm a cousin, sometimes I'm a friend. I like to say that I'm a great teammate, and I am more and more clear about being an individual on a journey that's seeking to make this world a little better than I found it to give my kids an opportunity to not have to experience every single thing that I've experienced. So that's a part of it. I think another part of what is happening is that, I think this past year has made me way more clear about our purpose of leaving things better. And by things, I mean the world, I mean the spaces that we live in, our homes, and the places where we work and have influence. And so I'm really in a reflective mood right now.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Leadership for me has shifted seismically because when I started almost a decade ago, working at the Chicago Teachers Union, it was really about rescuing public education in Chicago from the clutches of privatization, and making sure that it had legacy and that it could still serve people. And last year, it became even more so important because we were tasked with keeping people safe, right? It was COVID-19, and what we understood about COVID-19 is that it was impacting working people, it was impacting Black people, and it was impacting brown people. And all of those things, I feel like, are under our tent at CTU, so it was a tremendous amount of pressure, responsibility, accountability. And you take it seriously because you kept seeing casualty reports.

Stacy Davis Gates:

So how did I get here? Divine intervention, it wasn't on my bingo card any year. I was forced into this place. I think, that I thought I was just going to be, not just, but I thought my world will revolve around a classroom where I could read great books and that I could share those great books with my students, and that I could be a facilitator of my students finding their voice, finding their purpose. I know people talk a lot about graduation and college, but the more that I spent time in my classroom, the older I became and had experiences, I felt like our true purpose is to help our students find their purpose. I was a high school teacher. So it was less about the rudimentary skills of adding and subtracting and reading and writing, and more about the application of those things. And how do you apply those things in a city like Chicago, with students who were dealing with all sorts of things?

Stacy Davis Gates:

And so being forced into this place was more so of my inability to do my job well, to be honest with you. And it wasn't just the social pressures of privatization and school closings and all of the policies and politics behind being a part of the education space. But it was also the fact that

my students came into my world smarter than me already in ways in which it was difficult for me to access, either because I hadn't had those specific experiences or because I was ill prepared to deal with those experiences. And so it just made me more reflective of what it meant to teach in a place like Chicago and the support, the advocacy, the resources that educators and school communities needed. So I was called out, I think, by circumstance. And I'm glad because I think I do this better than I did instruction, to be honest with you. And I think the impact of this work is helping to transform the structures that needed transformation, and that will hopefully be in place for generations to come.

Monica Trinidad:

Oh, well, thank you Stacy so much. I am so thankful for the universe for intervening and bringing you to where you are now, because your labor and CTU's labor have literally saved lives. And I am just so, so thankful. And I'm really proud to be a supporter of your work and CTU's work. And one of the few reasons to be proud of Chicago, so thank you for your work. And today, the book that we are talking about is called *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks. And this is exciting, it's our first bell hooks book.

Monica Trinidad:

This book was published in 1981 and it is considered a classic of feminist literature. Do you remember the moment you were in when you read this book? And why did you choose it to talk about specifically today?

Stacy Davis Gates:

So I consider this book my foundation. I read it in my second year of college and I had a professor, Dr. Leonga from Cameroon, and she was the best because she introduced us to African Lit, but she also introduced me to bell hooks. And when I read bell hooks, I felt like I was getting a kitchen table conversation with an aunt, right? And bell hooks basically took my world as I was experiencing it and put it into historical context while also challenging me to think of myself as powerful, and to think of myself as complete and already formed.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And it was critical because it was a mostly white space where I was being educated, and if you don't have a sense of self in white spaces, it can really test your identity, sometimes your sanity, because the experiences that you bring into your living spaces, your residence hall, the experiences that you bring into your academic situation, are dissimilar, right, than the experiences that suburban white women were having. And so bell hooks was my refuge. The book at the time said, "Stacy, you are enough, you are not crazy, and you can do this." And it just felt affirming to read her at that time in my life.

Page May:

So from what I understand in this book, and I think you just started to lay out, bell hooks' is charting the history of how both racism and sexism have impacted Black women, and I think specifically, she's really going into how it's affected movements and the Civil Rights Movement and also the feminist movement. And so, yeah, just break it down for us, and we'll follow up with more questions, but can you summarize the main points in histories that she talks about?

Stacy Davis Gates:

So it was like this 360 critique of how we are viewed and how our reflections of ourselves come from those categories and boxes that we're put in by others. It also provides a clear repudiation of those categories of boxes by placing into context, one, our ability to overcome the patriarchy, the racism, the self-hate, the questioning that we put ourselves through, so it provides space for affirmation.

Stacy Davis Gates:

I think the book also does something that probably for bell hooks in 1981 to do was courageous, was that it called out Black men and movement spaces that often marginalize us. 'We will take your work, we will take your beauty, we will take your voice, but we are in charge' And the part that resonated with me, because I can still see, this is my original copy of the book, so I can still see my notes and my highlights from college, is Black men have to be partners too, right? And that if you take your power from me, then we can't overcome it, right? I get to stand as a singular human being and that doesn't reduce you. In fact, it makes us all better. She has a critique of *Raisin in the Sun* and how the family dynamics change once the main Black character figured out his strength and his voice.

Stacy Davis Gates:

But the part that I think was the best part of her critique was that she says that in order to find his voice, we had to be quiet. And up until the point of where he finds his voice, we are very active, we are very instructive, we are very supportive, we are very clear-eyed. And so how do you take the benefit of the journey of getting our brother to his face, and then shut it down in order for him to feel powerful and in charge? I left the book then without the words that I have now. The words that I have now is that I think we're all captives of white male patriarchal standards. And that if we continue to tie ourselves to a goal that none of us will reach unless we are white and male, then we'll always fail.

Stacy Davis Gates:

So you break through, you have to break through, you have to name it, you have to see yourself. And I think one more thing too that's important in her entire discussion is Sojourner Truth is a part of almost every chapter. She borrows heavily from her experience as a freedom fighter, as an abolitionist, to becoming a feminist before that even became a word. And her ability to stand 10 toes down, period, in the face of all of it, everyone and everything, and today I read that

differently. I think, damn, that woman was tired and people depended on her resilience. And I often wonder who fed her, who hugged her, who told her she was okay, that she was sparring, that she was strong, that she could do it? Who nurtured her?

Stacy Davis Gates:

And I think today, we have examples of how we care for each other, not that we always do it well, not that we always practice self-care, but I wonder, what did it feel like to have self care post-slavery, just right out of slavery? What was the language then? And what was the call? And then what was the response? So anyway, that's just a small tangent.

Page May:

There's a lot about white feminism that I think we'll get into, I know that's a question that Monica has. But kind of continuing with this theme, because I think about that a lot. So I think all the time about Harriet Tubman and just how, and the ways that I have recently have gone back to teaching and have worked with young people for most of my organizing, and within those spaces when I ask, who are the Black heroes of movement, right? Who are the folks that we know and lift up? And it's overwhelmingly men, right? And you see the ways that Black women get erased.

Page May:

But then there, at the same time, there is this sort of lionizing of the few Black women that make our lists as these, sort of like they're superheroes. And thinking about just, yeah, what is that telling young Black women in terms of what's our role, what our history and what we have to do and what we can expect? But anyways, so I'm vibing a lot with what you're saying, and I'm wondering if you could lay out a little bit more of in movement spaces, what does she say about what this looks like, in terms of the ways that Black women in Black spaces are, they're present, but that we see how they're erased just by asking people to name Black women leaders, right? Or to name Black women that have been killed by the police, right? It's very, it's clearly still relevant, it is still present. But for folks who maybe aren't inside of those spaces, who aren't organizers, or maybe they just aren't Black, what are the things that bell hooks lifts up or that you have seen about how Black women are systemically oppressed, even in Black liberation spaces?

Stacy Davis Gates:

The thing that... That's a question. One, that I would say that our resilience is required in ways that we don't require it from anyone else. I think that our understanding is a requirement, and I would even venture to say that our overstanding is a requirement, not just our understanding, but our overstanding.

Stacy Davis Gates:

It has taken me, quite frankly, until recently, within the last couple of months to also name my respect as a human being in these spaces as work too. And if the actual outcome is delayed

because I have to assert my humanity, then I should not feel like we missed a day, or we missed an objective to meet, because I think the objective always has to be centering our humanity, naming it and holding others accountable for it. And I think one of the reasons why I am able to do it is because, because this book helped me situate the experience that other Black women before me have had, and that me naming it, me protecting my space, protecting my boys, protecting myself, and taking space, right, is historical, is the pathway, and the work to do.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Because if Harriet didn't take space, if Sojourner didn't take space, if bell hooks didn't provide us with the historical analysis of taking space, then perhaps I would never be in a position to take my space because I wouldn't have language for it. I wouldn't have an understanding of the examples that came before me. And like I said, recently, I have started to define work broader in more broad terms than I have traditionally. And I think that's a lesson actually is that you get to hold people accountable to your humanity. You get to call out emails and remarks that try and chip away at what you bring into the spaces that you occupy. You get to do that, that also is a part of the work. And you have to see it as making your team stronger. You have to see it as a part of organizing, because I'm not the only Black woman that people will encounter.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And then here's the other thing, surround yourself with other Black women to help affirm and validate, who understand what it feels like, what it looks like and what it sounds like, amplify and affirm our voices in these spaces together. Heck, I've even started the practice of tag-teaming in the meeting, to make sure that the person who I don't think is being heard traditionally knows that I am going to echo you, I am going to support you. And I have heard my colleagues do the same thing, and that practice is helpful because what we're doing is implicitly teaching other people how to treat us. And that's important.

Stacy Davis Gates:

But what I am interested in in this moment too, is pointing out the people who don't get the headlines, lifting up and amplifying the folks who are on the ground, doing the work. Like that is a part of the leadership that I'm supposed to model, right? Because I do have a rarefied space in Chicago, in labor, in movement. The most courageous Black women are probably not even 18 years old yet. It's all of the young people who are out here unapologetically naming the oppression and challenging the structure to be better for them.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And when I tell you that my practice now in terms of the work has changed, it's really changed because of their example. The fact that they take zero shit, zero, forced me to reflect on the accommodation that I make for patriarchy, the accommodation that I make for whiteness, the accommodation that I make when I don't say the thing that's going to make someone else

uncomfortable, but it's also making me uncomfortable. So why would I do that to myself? They don't practice that, and that is such an awesome practice to have. It's one where, I can remember, and bell hooks talks about this in her book, how we are socialized as girls, Black girls in particular, that there's no one to protect us. I remember being taught when I first started going to parties, you don't leave your drink anywhere, you come home at a certain hour, make sure you look respectable. This was before cell phones, so you had to keep money in your pocket for the payphone.

Stacy Davis Gates:

All of the rules that were handed down by my granny, by my mom, by my aunts, by my grandma, were to protect me because what they didn't verbalize was that no one else will protect you because you are the most unprotected person in society. And if something happened to me, the way in which the criticism is inward and not outward, when I tell you that there's been a 360 change in how I see most everything related to my person as a woman, is because of young Black women. And I can get emotional about this too, because I thought for so long, why did I take someone else's responsibility? If someone hurts me, it's not my fault, it's their fault for hurting me. And then also releasing the women who raised me from blame because they loved me, but they knew that they wouldn't always be able to protect me, they knew that there were zero structures in our society to protect me, so this is the best way that I know how to protect you.

Monica Trinidad:

I'm thinking a lot about Black women, like Ida B. Wells and Francis Harper, and Sojourner Truth, like you mentioned, who were all segregated from marches at the height of the suffrage movement, right?

Monica Trinidad:

And so you think about all of this work, all of this labor that Black women have done. You think about Ida B. Wells, when she opened up her first Black suffrage club here in Chicago, in the early 1900s, while fighting for the rights of Black people to vote, she's also like literally fighting white women because they believe that Black women should wait until white women get the vote. And then I think about how, yeah, how Black women just had to just experience that as they fought for freedom and for the right to vote and for all of these things. And then you fast forward to like 2019, I remember that there was this... Oh, and then even before that, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony wrote a book on the history of suffrage, they left all Black women out of the book, out of the textbook.

Monica Trinidad:

And it makes me think about how you fast forward to 2019 and there's this public memorial going up for the suffrage movement, and they just put Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B.

Anthony, and they leave out Sojourner Truth, who plays such a huge role in it. And people fought back and people were like, no Truth has to be in this, and so then they added Truth into the public memorial, but it brings up something for me around questions of representation. Is that enough to put Truth in this public memorial and then that's it? Or I'm wondering, how does bell hooks talk about white feminism and its impact on Black women, not only in their experience, but how do we move forward in making sure that this doesn't continue to happen, this erasure of Black women's labor?

Stacy Davis Gates:

She has a whole chapter dedicated to that, in fact, is that she makes very plain that the only benefit to the division between white feminists and Black feminists is status quo, is patriarchy and racism. The division that we have only perpetuates the very thing that each white feminist and Black feminists want to change. And I think what she does is make clear, at least she made clear for me, is that in order to dismantle patriarchy, you have to be clear about the plight of the Black woman, the voice and the leadership of the Black woman, that if we ever hope to overcome patriarchy and white supremacy, that we have to center the being that stands at the intersection of that, right? And provide space and voice for that leadership, and to challenge white women to sit with that for a moment, right?

Stacy Davis Gates:

What does it mean for our sisters, our white sisters, to sit with the fact that it is not just patriarchy? And the type of reflection that they have to have about white supremacy, and the roles that white feminist organizations have played with not dismantling that at the inception of our base ability, right? She's also very clear about who has faced it before, because it's almost a history book too. It's not just a book on feminism, it's actually a very specific and clear attempt at providing case studies, if you will, about how this shows up and our interactions. And I think she makes it pretty clear, at least, like I said, to me, that the dismantling of patriarchy cannot be the only thing, especially if your sister has to also deal with racism.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Interestingly enough, in the book, she talks a lot about polling during the height of the feminist movement, and how Black women didn't necessarily identify as feminists, but if queried about what feminism is, what feminism challenges, they were more in line with it than their white counterparts. Real interesting.

Stacy Davis Gates:

But just like everything else, we figure out how to do it for ourselves because we know we need a space, we know we need an agenda and a platform and people to be organized, and we needed to do it for ourselves. I mean, look, we come out of the Civil Rights Movement clear about our ability to lead. Think about all of the women who were in the SCLC, right? Septima Clark is one

who comes to mind for me because she was an educator, obviously. You think about Angela Davis, you think about Elaine Brown, you think about all of these women who led because they had to lead. You think about the strength of the Civil Rights Movement being... Women were the anchors, right? Because men had economic interest to protect, and so they often could not amplify or lead in the way that they may have wanted to, right? You think about children within the Civil Rights Movement who also led, but it was patriarchy that kept their face from being the face.

Stacy Davis Gates:

You even think about, in this book always brings this to mind, to me, you think about Mahalia Jackson, she didn't just sing at the March on Washington, hell, she made the March on Washington because she was the one who called Martin to a higher place in that moment to provide the thing that is most notable about his legacy, it was his vision for what America could be. That was her. She knew the moment, she knew what she heard him say already, and she knew how it would impact everyone who they had captive in that moment. And then, there's a picture when she says it to him that's popularly out there, where you see, you don't see men looking at Martin, you see women looking at him, expected, clear, supportive, protective.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And so I think what women came out of that time period with was more confidence, was clarity, and I think they came out of it with the question of why they're not the person in that moment, right? Why aren't they the one standing behind the lectern, given the speech? We were the organizers, clearly we were the organizers. And so bell, 1981, she lived through this, right? This is what she lived through, what she saw in her household, what she observed in society. So she's able to, thank God she is, brilliant enough to absorb all of these lessons and then call it for what it's worth. She said that we are able to lead in that way. In fact, our leadership would be more inclusive. Our leadership would be more radical, our leadership would actually provide the type of change that we need to see.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And you keep seeing that happen, generation after generation. We don't get this discussion about policing in America right now without Black women. You just don't. It's been around forever, but the way in which organizers, and I don't even have to name names, it's so many names, right? It's a movement of us that have said, these are my sons, these are my brothers, these are... first. But the part that I think has been most provocative is Say Her Name, where they also name it for us as Black women as well. That's a big deal, right? That is a very big deal in how we get free.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Women are raising children, we are teaching our children lessons even when we don't sit them down and read passages with them. They are getting their language from us when they hear us on

the telephone or see us in meetings because they have to be there because childcare, right? And so what the women who are leading, the young women who are leading it, and I say young with all respect and admiration, because I wasn't that fearless and brilliant at that age, right? I was still checking in. I was still captive to the politics of respectability, really. And I tell people all the time, I don't get here without politics of respectability, and you are still captive of the politics of respectability. And so freeing ourselves of that, I think, puts us in a place of real leadership and transformation. I do. And in ways that free our children of the restrictions that we put on ourselves because of survival, because of protecting ourselves, and because of patriarchy and because of white supremacy.

Page May:

I'm still kind of, haunted's the wrong word, but in my feelings about how you said being a Black woman in these spaces requires resilience. And that is so true, to my experience and every Black woman organizer that I know, cis and trans, about just, you can expect, I mean, there's so much assault that happens in Black movement spaces to Black women, there's so much hostility and abuse on so many levels and neglect.

Page May:

And then on top of it all, the other thing that you looked at, Black women have been a part of all of these movements, right? But that it comes with this erasure. The white feminist movement is still built on Black women's thoughts, ideas, and labor, and then we call it white feminism. I get why we do that, I get that we're trying to create a, to show that there's a ceiling to these ideas, but it feels disrespectful to me at times because of, I know it wasn't just white women coming up with these things and doing this work.

Page May:

So anyways, I'm frustrated, I'm mad, and I'm imagining the moment when you read this book, and you talked about it as it felt like you were talking to your auntie, right, of just... What about it didn't lead to your despair? Because as you're naming, these things are still happening, but there's a new generation since bell hooks, right? And things are different, right, and there are new lines being drawn that are made even deeper and clearer. And I guess, what was it in the book that helped you move from maybe feelings of anger or frustration to a sense of onward and perseverance? And also what do you think needs to be said for the folks that are coming up right now, who insist on things being better than they were, but also that we don't live in the world that they deserve yet? Anything you can speak to those things.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Well, I have to routinely have one of my sisters tell me, "No, you're reading it right. No, it makes sense, you're not crazy." This book is that. It is an affirmation of my experience, it is an affirmation of my ability to analyze my experience, to give language to my experience. And it

also affirmed my rage with my cast in society. So my rage, the affirmation of my rage, I think is the thing that gives me permission to organize, to lead, to being impatient, and to always ask for more, to demand more, right? One of the things I think we're taught both explicitly and implicitly as little Black girls is to accept it, is to accept it, to follow the rules, to play the politics of respectability, and that it'll work out, when it only works out for a handful, if that.

Stacy Davis Gates:

You think about how many women are leading in any space, in any industry, and it's this much, right? It's very small. So that doesn't work because there are more brilliant Black girls, Black women, in all spaces who could be leading. But we talk ourselves out of it, we let other people talk us out of it, we let other people label and define us. A story, I read an article about me that no one bothered to ask me about, that assigned me my next steps in life. And I go, wow, this is interesting that this man at this publication gets to say to me what I have to do. And it's 2021. So you go back mentally, obviously, that this is not new, that this is the thing that is done, but it is new in that I'm responsible now for how I respond to it and how I reject it.

Stacy Davis Gates:

And you don't always know how, sometimes you just get pissed off about it and you pop off, right? Other times, you check in with your people and you're like, look, this really has done a number on me, do I respond? If I respond, how do I respond? And what should I be expecting? Or am I just doing this for me? Right? Or how do I make an impact where other people get a benefit from whatever I said and I did, right? So it's all of this extra labor that we put into these spaces, in our work, in our lives.

Stacy Davis Gates:

What I will say is that this book got me to the point of understanding the cast that I've been placed in as Black and female. It also got me to the point of challenging that because it was patriarchal, and because it was built on white supremacy. Now it's up to me after I read it to figure out how to be affirmed by it, and then reject all of the messages that continue to come at me. How do you build coalition around the humanity of Black women? And I'm not talking about a march down the street, I'm talking about when you're in a meeting with a group of people. I'm not talking about legislation to protect Black maternal healthcare, I'm talking about how do you go to the doctor and advocate for yourself?

Stacy Davis Gates:

There's a continuum, right, of things that we have to do. And sometimes it's the small thing, it's, did you ask the doctor about X, Y, and Z? Or to all of the young people in my life right now that are having children, and I'm texting them, make sure you do this, or give your address so I can send you this book, don't forget to do this for yourself, because I know that the nurse and I know that the doctor, they won't say that to them, right? I know that from the statistics. So it's the micro

and it's the macro, and then it's also my responsibility.

And I think that's what bell hooks also triggers, right? Is that you are accountable for now having this affirmation, you are accountable for this information. And so how do you apply it, not just in the big rally march way, but how do you apply it in the micro interactions that you have in your spaces? And so that's how I think I felt the most accountable for this information, who do I advocate for? I think that's why my voice is so strong in the Chicago Teachers Union, because I feel it, right? I feel a profound responsibility because bell told me that now I've given you this information, what do you do with it after I give it to you? How do you show up in the world now that you've been educated? So I don't know if I even answered your question, Page.

Stacy Davis Gates:

In 2021, as a 40-plus-year-old woman, I am more so thinking about all of the women that bell highlights, especially Sojourner Truth, and imagining myself situated in the same timeframe as she's situated, however many years off the plantation, and to be as clear-minded and as fearless and as unapologetic as she is, is absolutely brilliant. Women are often reduced to their emotions when people describe us. They talk about our passion, they talk about our hearts and our love for the work. They never describe me how Page introduced me. You talked about my courage, you talked about my brain power, you talked about my commitment. You didn't talk about... Not that my heart and my passion aren't also a part of it, but what leads it and what are people willing to center?

Stacy Davis Gates:

And so I often think now of the women then, knowing what I know about my experience, Jesus Christ, how fearless were they? And how... unprotected. I talk about being unprotected now, I got a lot of nerve. I got a lot of nerve. Now in my context, for sure, but just in a broader context of people who were unprotected in that moment, I think that's a thing that I think about. And I also think deeply about the way patriarchy shows up in our relationships with Black men, and how do we overcome that? Because I think the ideal of the man going out to work and bringing the bacon home and we fry it, is still prevalent in a popular imagination, even now. How do we dismantle that? And how do we free Black men of that caricature of a man, because that doesn't make you a man, right? And that ideal, that capitalistic ideal has our Black men getting locked up for doing things to make ends meet. Right?

Stacy Davis Gates:

And so they need to be freed of that just as much as we need to be freed of it. It goes back to when Black women get free, everybody get free. And I think bell, she just puts it out there in ways that just resonate. And I do have my passage. I found it.

Monica Trinidad:

Thank you, Stacy. Thank you so much for sharing all of your brilliance with us about this book.

Page May:

Well I'll say, thank you also for how much you shared of your story. It was really... Yeah. I really appreciated that vulnerability and honesty, and it meant a lot to me. It's coming at a time, a very important moment in my life of reflecting on what was the last 10 years? That was really hard. Whoa. And am I ready for round two? And so just to hear it from you and some things that felt similar in patterns is, how you frame it as affirming to, even though it's an injustice, it is affirming to know that other people go through it and continue. So thank you.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Yeah. And it's not easy. I spent a lot of March in my basement by myself, because just honestly, negotiating that Memorandum of Agreement for schools to reopen this past winter really did a number on me, like the amount of gaslighting that was apparent at the table, the dismissiveness of Black life, of brown life, the inability to work with people who looked like you to benefit people who look like us, it just really took a toll on me. It's like, if we can't agree during a once in a hundred year pandemic to center the lives of Black people and brown people who are in the nexus of the storm, it didn't give me a lot of hope for what we could do and overcome.

Stacy Davis Gates:

I'm still thinking through its impact, I'm still thinking through what do I take away and how do I apply it in the next round of whatever I get to experience? But this whole concept of identity politics, how we believe popularly that if we elect someone that looks like us, that they will take care of us. Intellectually, I don't believe it, and I wanted so desperately to have that last winter to make it easier and to restore my faith in humanity. Because I think for the last year, I've just seen the outright dismissiveness of the loss of our lives. Let's get back to normal. That is so offensive to me. Some of us will never be who we were and some of us never had a normal. And-

Monica Trinidad:

[crosstalk 00:58:28] Normal never worked for us. Yeah.

Stacy Davis Gates:

Yeah. And so yeah, that was... It is hard and there's still some residual for that too. But thankful for me, I have a coach who's helping me put stuff into place so I can use whatever lessons that I've learned in a way that it's productive along the way. Right now it's just depressing.

Monica Trinidad:

I feel that. That makes a lot of sense. Well, thank you, Stacy, so much for being on this call with us today virtually. Again, we talked about the book, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks, which was published in 1981. And we just spoke with Stacy Davis

Gates. Stacy, do you want to close us out? I know this is going to be hard to pick, but close us out with your favorite passage from the book.

Stacy Davis Gates:

So it is tremendously hard to pick, and I found it. It's bell's chapter, Black Women and Feminism, and it's her whole discussion of Sojourner Truth.

Stacy Davis Gates:

“Unlike most white women's rights advocates, Sojourner Truth could refer to her own personal life experience as evidence of woman's ability to function as a parent, to be the work equal of man, to undergo persecution, physical abuse, rape, torture, and to not only survive, but emerge triumphant. Sojourner Truth was not the only Black woman to advocate social equality for women. Her eagerness to speak publicly in favor of women's rights, despite public disapproval and resistance, paved the way for other politically minded Black women to express their views. Sexism and racism have so informed the perspective of American historians that they have tended to overlook and exclude the effort of Black women and discussions of the American women's rights movement.”

[OUTRO]

[Music fades in and lowers with voiceover]

Page May:

Thanks for listening to another episode of the Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about a book that has shaped their organizing work. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionists, cultural workers, and cat mamas who love nerding out on books and creating spark notes for our movements. Production this season is by Benji Russelburg, intro music is by David Ellis with production by Ari Mejia, and social media support from Alycia Kamil. If you like this episode, give it a shoutout on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, and if you like our podcast, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to help widen our reach. Financial support for the production of this podcast season is thanks to the Field Foundation of Illinois, and our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patron at Patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading!