

Transformation as a Transgressive Pedagogy: bell hooks

bell hooks is one of the most visible African-American intellectuals today, drawing large audiences wherever she speaks and appearing regularly on T.V. However, the American media has sought to shape public perception of her as a writer of autobiographical reflections on growing up Black and female in a racist world, and chosen to stress her work on love, yearning, and the craft of writing, rather than her concern with class and her insistence on the need for anti-capitalist analysis and practice. Although she acknowledges that for women of color in working class communities “coming to voice is an act of resistance ... a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject” (hooks, 1989, p. 12) she is skeptical of the idea that each of us has a unique voice representing our individual identity, and declares herself more interested in the struggle of groups to recover their collective voice, a voice “embodying collective reality past and present, family and community” (p. 31). She is also skeptical of the way resistance can easily be co-opted by the dominant culture. Although she does not cite Marcuse directly her analysis of the way dominant culture neutens criticism, while appearing to encourage it, is very close to Marcuse’s description of repressive tolerance. She writes “in a white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state where the mechanisms of co-optation are so advanced, much that is potentially radical is undermined, turned into a commodity” (hooks, 1989, p. 14). This commodification is achieved by radicals themselves who, in their eagerness to communicate with as many people as possible, find themselves using metaphors and analogies that reinforce dominant ways of knowing. In hooks view “it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, to be tuned in” (ibid.). In an effort to connect with the majority group, radicals are tempted “to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within a social framework that reinforces domination” (ibid.).

The quotes above illustrate how hooks works within the critical theory tradition. In *Talking Back* (1989) for example, she writes of the commodification of knowledge (p. 51), the reification and commodification of Blackness and the way this leads to alienation and estrangement (p. 70). She also returns again and again to the importance of class analysis, so strongly argued by Marx, and to the importance of attaching a critique of capitalism to any attempt to understand Black experience. In her talking book with Cornel West she laments “the reluctance of Black people to engage in any critiques of capitalism today” (hooks and West, 1991, p. 100). For hooks class analysis must always stand alongside the analysis of racism and sexism. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (hooks, 2000b) she laments the fact that in critically inclined conversation “the uncool subject is class” (p. vii) and that “there is no organized class struggle, no daily in-your-face critique of capitalist greed that stimulates thought and action-critique, reform and revolution” (p. 1). The fact that much feminist analysis concentrates on gender oppression is seen by her as a reflection of the way the concerns of white middle-class women have come to be universalized as the concerns of all. In her view “had poor women set the agenda for feminist movement they might have decided that class struggle would be a central feminist issue” (hooks, 1984, p. 61). Additionally, the analysis of

class and gender oppression cannot be conducted without attention to racism. In *Feminist Theory* (1984) she argues that “class structure in American society has been shaped by the racial politic of white supremacy” (p. 3) and that “it is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge” (ibid.). Hence, “class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism” (ibid.) and race and class issues should be “recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism” (ibid., p. 25).

hooks identifies some of the specific elements of contemporary ideological domination in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). Chief amongst these are the belief that deep racism doesn't exist anymore, that any Black person who works hard enough can become economically self-sufficient, that women have gained equality with men to the extent that White males are now the victim of minorities and domineering women, and that those who are poor and unemployed are in that state by choice (p. 29). Ideological domination maintains itself by the fact that people have “a lack of meaningful access to truth” (ibid.) so that they view the ideology described above as self-evidently true. In hooks' view “this collective cultural consumption of and attachment to misinformation is coupled with the layers of lying individuals do in their personal lives” (ibid.) and serves to rob people of the necessary energy for change. This ideological double whammy of cultural socialization and personal self-delusion means that “our capacity to face reality is severely diminished as is our will to intervene and change unjust circumstances” (ibid.). Any transformative education effort must therefore begin with laying bare the mechanics of ideological domination.

An important element in combating the ‘collective cultural consumption of and attachment to information’ described above is adult education. Unlike many critical theorists, hooks lays out an educational agenda for combating ideological domination in quite specific terms. Central to this agenda is the reliance on small groups as crucibles for feminist consciousness-raising and, hence, resistance. In terms that call to mind Horton's work at Highlander, hooks argues that small groups are particularly suited to the integration of critical analysis into discussions of personal experiences. Small groups more easily allow for the democratization of conversation and they stress the importance of an oral sharing of information, which reduces the relative dominance of white academic feminists. As such they are good settings for “the politicization of the self that focuses on creating understanding of the ways sex, race, and class together determine our individual lot and collective experience” (hooks, 1989, p. 24).

hooks has less to say about the pedagogy of small groups, however, than she does about her own practice within formal classrooms. She views the feminist classroom as an arena of struggle distinguished by a striving for a union of theory and practice. One of the most striking elements in her analysis is her emphasis on the inevitability of teacher power and the ways in which its exercise is often unavoidably, even necessarily, confrontational. In her judgment the role of teacher “is a position of power over others” with the resultant power open to being used “in ways that diminish or in ways that enrich” (hooks, 1989, p. 52). She freely admits that sometimes the exercise of power to force people to confront their own uncritical acceptance and practice of dominant ideology is fraught with risk.

Transformation is neither sought nor welcomed, in her view. To emphasize the commitment to the learning of others that transformative practice requires she takes attendance, a practice reminiscent of elementary school for many skeptical adult students. To underscore the importance of attendance she lets students know that poor attendance negatively affects their grade. She requires all to participate in class discussion, often by reading out paragraphs they have already written. Such practices inevitably lead to negatively critical comments by students, a fact that she admits has been difficult for her to accept. Because “many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding” (hooks, 1994, p. 53) teachers who work transformatively are bound to be resisted, even disliked. This is why hooks insists that students’ perception of the classroom as a safe, positive or congenial environment for learning is not a good criterion to use in assessing teacher competence where transformative education is concerned.

In emphasizing the kinds of confrontational practices outlined above, hooks demonstrates her liking for pedagogic flexibility. In methodological terms, she comes close to Cornel West’s position of critical pragmatism, whereby the pursuit of revolutionary ends and engagement with transformative practice is distinguished by a continuous readiness to experiment with different approaches. hooks believes that “to make feminist classrooms the site of transformative learning experiences, we must constantly try new methods, new approaches” (1989, p. 54). In reflecting on her pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress* she observes that “there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction” (1994, p. 7). One interesting authorial manifestation of this experimental disposition is her use of the pseudonym bell hooks (her real name is Gloria Watkins). By using a pseudonym she frees herself to leave behind ways of thinking that now seem inaccurate, without feeling she has somehow compromised her basic identity. As she puts it in *Talking Back* (1989), “in using the pseudonym I consciously sought to make a separation between ideas and identity so that I could be open to challenge and change” (p. 163). The public perception of her as bell hooks frees her “to change perspectives, to let them go if necessary, to admit errors in my thinking” (ibid.).

Finally, hooks privileging of openness and inclusivity is seen in her willingness to work with Whites and with males in the struggle against white supremacy. Once again, the similarities between her stance and that of Cornel West’s on this issue are apparent. Both emphasize that confronting systemic forces requires allies drawn from all segments of society, and that the building of such alliances can be done without compromising one’s racial identity. In hooks’ view refusing to work with Whites in the struggle against white supremacy “is a gesture that undermines my commitment to that struggle” (hooks, 1989, p. 118). Similarly, in critiquing exclusively anti-male conceptions of feminism, she argues that such an orientation alienated many non-white, poor and working class women from the feminist movement. Such women believe “that they have more in common with men of their race and/or class group than bourgeois white women” (hooks, 1994, p. 68). In particular, Black men and women are united by the ties of collective struggle for liberation.

One final element of hooks' work that is of particular interest to transformative educators who wish to draw on critical theory as they construct and live out their practice, is her insistence on developing theoretical work that is accessible to a broad group of people while losing none of its power to critique. Recalling Gramsci's (1971) unwittingly sexist aphorism that all men are intellectuals hooks writes that "everything we do in life is rooted in theory" (2000a, p. 19) and that "we all use it in daily life" (1989, p. 38). Since theory is no more than an underlying system of understandings that shape thought and practice, it "is not an alien sphere" (ibid.). Theory, like feminism, is for everybody, and people "practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term" (hooks, 1994, p. 62).

However, although everybody is a theoretician, many people are intimidated by the language of feminist theory. This is ironic since feminist theory, like critical theory, has a deliberately transformative intent. But in hooks' view, the dominance of feminist discourse by white women academics, overly influenced by French post-structuralism, has meant that for many working women feminist theory "is synonymous with that which is difficult to comprehend, linguistically convoluted" (hooks, 1989, p. 36). Feminist theory has become "a narrow constricting concept" (ibid.) to the extent that "it reinforces the fear, especially on the part of the exploited and oppressed, that the intent of theorizing is not to liberate but to mystify" (ibid. p. 37). When this happens the radical, subversive potential of theory is clearly undermined. If the transformative purpose of theory is to be realized, hooks believes it must be written in accessible terms. In her view "theory cannot become the groundwork for feminist movement unless it is more accessible" (ibid. p. 39).

Creating theory that is accessible, yet that has critical power, requires some important shifts in direction for feminists, according to hooks. First, academics must rid themselves of the conception that "speaking about one's personal experience or speaking in simple language is ... a sign of intellectual weakness or even anti-intellectualism" (hooks, 1989, p. 77). This is why the commitment by feminist pedagogues to transformative education must "start with examining the self from a new, critical perspective" (ibid. p. 109). However, the examination of one's own experiences must not slide into an uncritical celebration of everyone's stories, or a series of untheorized personal disclosures. hooks believes feminist educators "must work to link personal narratives with knowledge of how we must act politically to change and transform the world" (ibid. p. 111). There must also be a renewed effort on the part of feminist theorists "to speak simply with language that is accessible to as many folks as possible" (ibid, p. 77). This means that colloquialisms, slang, the language of the streets must be used to communicate the insights of feminism to those that habitually use that language. If feminism is to be a mass movement to end sexism then there is little point, according to hooks, in using theoretical language understood by only a small cadre of intellectuals. As she puts it "if I do not speak a language that can be understood, then there is little chance for dialogue" (ibid. p. 78). For radical intellectuals of color like herself, the issue of language is particularly crucial since a rejection of familiar, colloquial speech patterns that represent distinctive aspects of a person's racial heritage and identity "is one of the ways we become estranged and alienated from our past" (ibid. p. 80). This has led hooks to

experiment with methods of expression that risk the opprobrium of her peers. Just as Cornel West was seen by some as straying from the intellectual straight and narrow by recording his CD "Sketches of my Culture" so hooks has been criticized for venturing into children's literature with her book *Happy to be Nappy* (hooks, 1999).