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Repowering Intellectual Life. bell hooks and the Critique of Racial Education

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Abstract

For bell hooks, the relationship between teaching and learning is historical. What the academy is from the perspective of a concept of knowledge that is historically located within differences of race, class and gender, what hierarchies it reaffirms and what spaces of thought it opens is the focus of hooks' reflection on education. Faced with the corporatization of the US university, the institutionalization of women's and black studies, hooks puts forward a radical vision of education, which considers teaching a transgression of any "bureaucratization of the mind:" learning is about opening up a process of collective transformation.

Keywords: bell hooks; engaged pedagogy; feminism; liberation; community.

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> All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.[1]

1 Engaged Pedagogy. Teaching as a Political Act

In the weeks before the English Department at Oberlin College was about to decide whether or not I would be granted tenure, I was haunted by dreams of running away—of disappearing—yes, even of dying. These dreams were not a response to fear that I would not be granted tenure. They were a response to the reality that I would be granted tenure. I was afraid that I would be trapped in the academy forever.[2]

This confession reveals bell hooks' critics of the academy as a space that traps teaching and learning in the rules of "the corporate university classroom,"[3] "a degree-centered context" and hardly a space where learning can be practiced as a process of collective transformation, "a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership."[4] In the context of what has been called US "corporate university"[5] and "academic capitalism,"[6] describing the complicated relationship between Black Studies and Women's Studies programs and dominant "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values,"[7] hooks has the audacity to propose the "building of a teaching community."[8] Since the academy has been not only a "knowledge factory"[9] but also a place of contested and critical knowledge, of mobilizations crucial to feminist struggle,[10] the increasing privatization of U.S. higher education institutions has had profound consequences not only on feminist work in the academy, but especially on that radical attempt to face the historical conflict between feminism and antiracism and to resist the "management of race" in the liberal academy since the '80s.[11] The globalization of North American academy[12] has led to a less segregated space but has not necessarily really hit and affected what hooks calls the "domineering mentality"[13] at the base of the institutionalization of multiculturalism in the academy. Her work is therefore an innovative attempt to theorize

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York-London: Routledge, 1994), 34.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 1.
3. bell hooks, *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York-London: Routledge, 2003), 21.
4. Ibid., xv.
5. Henry Giroux, "Democracy's Nemesis. The Rise of the Corporate University," in *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 9, 5 (2009): 669–695, 674. See also Henry Giroux and Myrsiades Kostas, *Beyond the Corporate University: Culture and Pedagogy in the New Millennium* (New York, NY: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001); Henry Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).
6. Sheila Slaughter and Leslie Larry, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17.
7. Ibid, 1.
8. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 129.
9. Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 33. See also Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal and Radical Debate over Schooling* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1987); cf. *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (1988), special issue On Racism in Academia and American Education, in particular María de la Luz Reyes and John Halcón, "Racism in Academia: The Old Wolf Revisited," in *Harvard Educational Review* 58, 3 (1988): 299–315.
10. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 170.
11. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," in *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989–1990): 179–208, 183, 186.
12. Jan Currie, "Globalization Practices and the Professoriate in Anglo-Pacific and North American Universities," in *Comparative Education Review* 42, 1 (1998): 15–30, 19.
13. bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 128. Cf. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy eds., *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

pedagogy in the context of a restructured academy and of the history of feminist and Black struggles inside teaching institutions. In this direction, her work is both propaedeutic and complementary to that of her friend and colleague Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose critique of corporate academy has many points in common with hooks' theory of education.[14]

Hooks' work, however, is not only an anticapitalist critique of the corporate academy. To the critique of the political economy of American educational institutions and the commodification of knowledge, hooks adds a historical and political reflection of the relationship between feminist and Black movements and transformations of educational institutions. She analyzes how these movements and the disciplines they helped to create challenged traditional knowledge and social conservatism; how the racism of white feminism and the denial of patriarchal power in Black movements weakened Women's and Black Studies and prevented them from resisting an institutionalization that integrated them in order to de-radicalize them.

Starting from this history and the problems it leaves open, hooks has the explicit claim to not only criticize the academy, but to rekindle a debate and a front of contestation within it and in communication with the world outside the academy, questioning the paradoxical division between academy and society, as between theory and praxis. Hers is actually a critical reflection on the political role of teaching and knowledge in the context of society tout court. Also in question is the role of what she calls a "learning community" can play in a context in which "liberal individualism has actually been an assault on community. The notion that 'real freedom' is about not being interdependent, when the genuine staff of life is our interdependency, is our capacity to feel both with and for ourselves and other people."[15] To do this, hooks discusses and shows the tensions within the concepts of identity, community and education, partly by forcing their internal contradictions and partly by reinventing their meaning and political perspective. This critical perspective on the academy helps to understand her conception of theory as a collective process that cannot be confined to the academy.

Education, understood as a pedagogy of dissent and as a process of liberation, has been a constant theme in hooks' thinking and to her is a more complex and wider subject than strictly academic knowledge. Her trilogy on this theme—*Teaching to Transgress* (1994), *Teaching Community* (2003), *Teaching Critical Thinking* (2010)—focuses particularly on teaching as a process of knowing—and not just transmitting—difference and to understand its relationship to a dominant culture of uniformity. The point for her is not simply a theory of education that takes race, class and gender into account. To talk about race, class and gender for hooks is to talk about education, that is, how is it possible to learn and relate to knowledge in a world that embodies these differences, how is it possible to *teach to transgress* hierarchies, the plan in which differences are ordered, without neutralizing the politicalness they convey, and finally how teaching can mean "transgressing those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning."[16] In doing this and discussing an "engaged pedagogy," offering theoretical and practical insights, hooks observes the academy as a wider socio-political space where the boundaries and terms of capitalist democracy are redefined and reproduced.[17]

The transgression hooks speaks about should be understood here as indiscipline with respect to a racist law, the one that continued to command knowledge with the end of segregation, and to the institutionalization of multiculturalism within the educational and especially academic system. Parallel to the entry of Women's Studies into the curricula and its canonization, the spread of pluralism and affirmative action policies[18] since the 1960s has generated a series of contradictions that have exposed the conflict between critical knowledge and academic knowledge, i.e., between a knowledge that aims at the transformation of the educational institution and one that aims first and foremost at reproducing

14. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 170.

15. George Brosi and bell hooks, "The Beloved Community: A Conversation between bell hooks and George Brosi," in *Appalachian Heritage* 40, 4, Fall (2012): 76–86, 84.

16. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress,* 13.

17. bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 185.

18. Cf. Niara Sudarkasa, "Affirmative Action or Affirmation of Status Quo? Black Faculty and Administrators in Higher Education," in *AAHE Bulletin* (February, 1987): 3–6.

it and maintaining it in the service of what hooks calls "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[19]

To articulate the history of this conflict, hooks starts with the end of racial segregation to show how it represented the reaffirmation of a white dominance promoted and reproduced by the very dynamics of racial integration. The principle of desegregation was more legal than political: equal access to education could not be obtained simply with mixed classrooms.[20] The transition from Black schools to schools that had hitherto been white was not only traumatic, but destructive of a historical and political significance of the Black community as a community of struggle and resistance. Even more than the differentiated entrances for Blacks and whites, what restored racial hierarchy was the way the educational institution denied the embodied antagonism and conflictuality of difference.

> School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-Black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority.[21]

As her friend and colleague Chandra Talpade Mohanty wrote, the problem of multiculturalism was its institutionalization "in terms of an apolitical, ahistorical cultural pluralism."[22] Both Women's Studies and Black and Ethnic Studies originated as an outcome of the struggles of social movements. The integration of these disciplines into academic institutions represented a victory insofar as they were born to offer denied knowledge, but also showed that this knowledge had to be purged of its most disruptive aspects in order to be canonized. As disciplines that have, in origin and in theory, the claim to question the canon of academic knowledge, their institutionalization has been subordinated to a process of depoliticization. It has been pursued in two ways: first through the individualization of political instances, i.e., by transforming groups and subjects into objects embodying classifiable differences. In this way, conflict is addressed simply by negotiating between individuals dissatisfied as individuals. The elimination of collective instances has thus been a key step in the integration of these disciplines into the academy, not only in the United States.

The second way was to integrate these disciplines into existing curricula in such a way as to deactivate their conflictual charge. Assimilation has been a way of marginalizing, canonizing and then isolating the humanities in which race, class, and gender represent real, collective experiences and not categories of individual behavior. hooks gives an emblematic example of this domestication by recounting how, in women's studies, Black scholars and literary women were included in the curricula in the "race and difference" chapter, as if they had nothing to say as women, with the simultaneous outcome of a marginalization of Black thought and its specialization that ended up drawing an even deeper dividing line between Black experience and white experience, constructing a harmless bon ton of identities. This confinement is, according to hooks, a typical trait of academic knowledge insofar as it is born from the beginning as a place of reproduction of a privileged class of values, where necessarily also the processes of inclusion must take place first of all through the cancellation of class differences.[23] In this direction, the individualization of subjective instances produces the illusion of an equality that allows power hierarchies and structures of racist discrimination to remain unchallenged, while preventing processes of subjectification that are not based on given and immobile identities. Determining the source of oppression and change at the level of individuals allows an elision between ideological and structural conceptions of power and domination and individual and psychological

19. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism* (London and Winchester, MA: Pluto Press, 1982), 190.

20. See Sarah J. Reber, "School Desegregation and Educational Attainment for Blacks," in *The Journal of Human Resources* 45, 4 (2010): 893–914; Kenneth B. Clark, "Some Principles Related to the Problem of Desegregation," in *The Journal of Negro Education* (Summer, 1954): 339–347.

21. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 3.

22. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* 208.

23. bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York - London: Routledge, 2000), 1–9.

conceptions of power. It is no coincidence that psychological support figures and consultants who are experts in "diversity" are flourishing in universities. This psychologization of differences goes hand in hand with the privatization of educational structures. Race and gender are no longer collective categories connected to the structural and historical reality of racism and sexism, but behaviors and forms of interaction between individuals. The shift from racism to legal discrimination dismantles the doctrine of equality by reducing the political and social phenomenon against which a collective subject can organize. This individualization not only makes differences equivalent, but in doing so eliminates their political and social value.

> What academia does is try to erase our uniquenesses; in a sense to make us all homogenized members of a privileged class group. When people break away from that, using the subversion of style, we are often condemned. This is certainly happening in feminist theory.[24]

To explain the processes of institutionalization and de-radicalization of Women's and Black/Ethnic Studies, hooks notes how these disciplines, born within racial segregation, are the outcome of an unresolved conflict in feminist thought.[25] The simple white vs. Black construction prevents us from seeing and understanding how differences mutually implicate each other historically and politically. Mohanty explains this very effectively through the concept of complication: "Complication refers to the idea that all of us (First and Third World) share certain histories as well as certain responsibilities: ideologies of race define both white and Black peoples, just as gender ideologies define both women and men."[26] During her teaching at Oberlin College, together with Mohanty, hooks

> was disturbed by what I felt was a lack of understanding on the apart of many professors as to what the multicultural classroom might be like. Chandra Mohanty, my colleague in Women's Studies, shared these concerns. […] Together, we decided to have a group of seminars focusing on transformative pedagogy that would be open to all professors. […] When the meetings concluded, Chandra and I initially felt a tremendous sense of disappointment. We had not realized how much faculty would need to unlearn racism to learn about colonization and decolonization and to fully appreciate the necessity for creating a democratic liberal arts learning experience.[27]

This experience highlighted several problems: first of all, the resistance to conceive teaching as a political and non-neutral act and the difficulty to accept and think conflict as part of the learning process. Teaching as a political act does not refer to the contents, i.e. it is not a form of cultural propaganda, but on the contrary, it is the acceptance of the impossible neutrality of knowledge and the importance of conflict for a knowledge that pursues truth.

2 Theorizing as Social Practice. From the Authority of Experience to Collective Liberation

To understand hooks' political theory, it is useful to start with some figures that she recognizes as important teachers and influences, the Black women who were her teachers in school and life, Paulo Freire, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and Martin Luther King. *Education as a Practice of Freedom*, the subtitle of *Teaching to Transgress*, is not coincidentally a homage to Freire's

24. Mary Childers and bell hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York-London: Routledge, 1990), 60–81.

25. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984); Raffaella Baritono, "An ideology of sisterhood? American Women's Movements between Nationalism and Transnationalism," in *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (2008): 181–199; Paola Rudan, *Donna. Storia e critica di un concetto polemico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), 129–174.

26. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 203.

27. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 38.

first book[28] and some of hooks concepts are feminist reworkings of his most important pedagogical formulas. The chapter dedicated to him in *Teaching to Transgress* is constructed as a dialogue with herself, because the theoretical and political link with his thought is that of a legacy critically put to value, also through the feminist critique of Freire's reflection.

> There was this one sentence of Freire's that became a revolutionary mantra for me: "We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects." [...] Deeply committed to feminist pedagogy, I find that, much like weaving a tapestry, I have taken threads of Paulo's work and woven it into that version of feminist pedagogy I believe my work as writer and teacher embodies.[29]

From Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, hooks takes up and elaborates the concept of experience as a tool of knowledge and communication with reality, not as a form of identity narcissism[30] but as a way to reconnect subject and power. However, hooks makes a very critical use of Freire's thought, not only for the centrality she gives to patriarchal oppression in her analysis, but also for the centrality she gives to "class," as a material and political condition to think and struggle against oppression,[31] while Freire with his insistence on the eradication of the "oppressor consciousness" as a cultural matter, rather than a political issue.[32] The influence of Thich Nhat Hanh, whose philosophy "emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit," allowed her to think of knowledge and teaching as processes and as relationships, in which teacher and student must actively participate. Both are involved in the practice of theory, that is, in what makes theory something that responds to reality and acts in practice.

"I came to theory because I was hurting."[33] With this statement, hooks introduces her conception of theory as a liberating social practice, or as the knowledge that not only makes sense of reality but also enables us to understand it and thus combats alienation from it. She underlines the importance of reconnecting subjective experience and political experience against the fictitious division between public and private and the individualization of social instances. This does not simply mean that the personal is political, but also that the political is not personal, a lesson that, as Mohanty reminds us, represented in the 1980s the drift of the famous 1968 slogan, when "all politics is collapsed into the personal, and questions of individual behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles stand in for the political analysis of the social. Individual political struggles are seen as the only relevant and legitimate form of political struggle."[34]

Experience is a critical site from which it is possible to see and discover, but it must also work as a vehicle for political connection and communication. In this definition there is a fundamental differentiation between experience and essence: it is possible, hooks argues, to critique essentialism and to value the significance of "the authority of experience."[35] The discourse is even more complex than it already appears because this authority cannot create a hierarchy of voices, but should give voice to difference in such a way as to counteract the absolutism and authoritarianism of the structures of domination:

> There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a Black 'essence'

28. Paulo Freire, *Educação como Practica da Liberdade* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1967).

29. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 49, 52.

30. Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, "Radical Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Beyond the Discourse of Critique and Anti-utopianism," in *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics*, eds. Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 152–186.

31. bell hooks, *Where We Stand*, 101–171.

32. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005), 55.

33. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 59.

34. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 214.

35. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 81.

> and recognition of the way Black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle.[36]

The critique of essentialism and identity politics cannot become a weapon to devalue experience and its politicity, to target those who, as the philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, take essence as a strategy to claim their voice and to oppose subalternity.[37] If on one hand "abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism," to free subjects from static and over-determined forms of identity, built on a presumed model of authenticity, on the other hand "a privileged critical location from which to speak [...] is not a re-inscription of modernist master narratives of authority which privilege some voices by denying voice to others. Part of our struggle for radical Black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory."[38] For hooks, to critique essentialism means first of all to unveil the way in which knowledge is constructed and conveyed by institutionalized structures of domination. If classroom experience is valued as the starting point of a collective critical practice, the competition around the value of different experiences is undermined from the ground up.

> Assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic others are not the only available options and never have been. This is why it is crucial to radically revise notions of identity politics, to explore marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory Black liberation struggle [...] A similar effort is taking place within feminist theory, where an identity politics based on essentialism is critiqued, while the connection between identity and politics is affirmed.[39]

Criticizing the monolithic construction of identity does not necessarily mean refusing to recognize positions that allow for deeper and more complex analyses of reality. In this sense, hooks affirms that the "complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know."[40]

Thinking of identity as a privileged place is a way of coming to terms with what identity can no longer be.[41] Reflecting on Black nationalism, hooks argues that it offers no answer to the identity crisis to which it claims to respond:

> The identity crisis we suffer has to do with losing a sense of political perspective, not knowing how we should struggle collectively to fight racism and to create a liberatory space to construct radical Black subjectivity. This identity has to do with resistance, with reconstructing a collective front to re-vision and renew Black liberation struggle.[42]

Cultural identity has increasingly become a trap, especially in the face of the postmodern critique of the subject that would relativize its political relevance.[43] However, according to hooks, it is not easy

36. bell hooks, *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 61.

37. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 109; See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1987).

38. bell hooks, *Yearning*, 60; bell hooks and Stuart Hall, *Uncut Funk. A Contemplative Dialogue* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 40–48.

39. hooks and Hall, *Uncut Funk*, 46–47. See also Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989); Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, 3 (1988): 405–436.

40. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 91.

41. Cf. Lorraine Kenny, "Traveling Theory: The Cultural Politics of Race and Representation. An Interview with Kobena Mercer," in *Afterimage* 18, 2 (1990): 7–9.

42. bell hooks, *Yearning*, 69.

43. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, UK: University Press, 1989), 14–17.

not to be suspicious of a critique of identity that forgets those for whom its affirmation is vital. In this direction, hooks shifts the weight of identity to the crucial political ground of resistance, and to the collective level, the construction of a common front of liberation and struggle. In this conception identity is not grounded in or aimed at restoring a narrow cultural nationalism that masks a fascination with the power of the hegemonic white other, but "as a stage in a process wherein one constructs radical Black subjectivity;"[44] it is therefore to be taken as a resource, not a solution.

Here it is also possible to trace a difference in her reasoning and language: while in the first texts hooks more often uses the concept "politics of space,"[45] in the following texts and in those dedicated to education she confronts the concept of identity in the face of a debate that has brought it back to the surface in an increasingly problematic way. She returns to the problem of experience and essentialism, holding together some key concepts through which, according to her, it is necessary to rethink the problem of difference and community: antagonism, the authority of experience, the voice of the marginalized subject, and what she calls the "necessity to become," the capacity the community must have to transform itself and remain "radically open."

Hooks thus elaborates a political horizon of teaching, which we can define as a *critical community*, since its starting point is precisely a critique of the community as it has been given up to now, that is, of its reactionary nature, of the absolute thinking that has predetermined it: "If we think of how imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy has pushed itself globally, it's pushed itself around a concept of being right. Until we can move away from that kind of absolutist thinking, we can't have the beloved community."[46] This concept has a long history in American political traditions, going back at least to the early 20th century when there was a need to rethink the idea of community in the face of the changes due to the industrial revolution. The beloved community recalls not only religious instances, but it is rooted in the thought of John Dewey, Jane Addams and more in general with a political pluralism which retains a specific idea of conflict.[47]

In hooks' thought, the use of the concept of community has a dual function, historical-political and ideal, and it is integral to her understanding of the political meaning of theory. To explain her conception of theory as a process of critical dialogue that has the power to challenge patriarchal and racist dictates and class domination, hooks relies on a historical and political analysis of theorizing as a transgressive political act, defining words as forms of action. The de-radicalization of Women's Studies has turned them into machines for producing classes of intellectuals, where the value of theory is measured on the level of abstraction rather than the quality of discourse. In this way, academic feminist theory not only reproduces hierarchization but also frustration, because it is a dialogue between a few, disconnected from lived reality. This kind of theory has internalized the assumption that theory is not, and should not be, a social practice and has produced contempt for knowledge on the part of those who need theory to oppose domination:

> There is a link between the silencing we experience, the censoring, the anti-intellectualism in predominantly Black settings that are supposedly supportive (like all-Black woman space), and that silencing that takes place in institutions wherein Black women and women of color are told that we cannot be fully heard or listened to because our work is not theoretical enough.[48]

Against a theory that rejects social practice, that is, for hooks that denies both dedication to truth and a real expansion of knowledge, she recalls the need for feminist theory to free itself from the process of commodification and neutralization to which it is subjected and to return to speak with the

44. bell hooks, *Yearning*, 46.

45. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 77, 202; bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 8.

46. Brosi and hooks, "The Beloved Community," 82.

47. See Raffaella Baritono, *La democrazia vissuta. Individualismo e pluralismo nel pensiero di Mary Parker Follett* (Torino: La Rosa, 2001); Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved community. The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank & Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990): 266–295.

48. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 68.

subjects of its analyses. If feminist knowledge is to still have transformative power over the society it analyzes, it must return theory to its place of origin:

> Within revolutionary feminist movements, within revolutionary Black liberation struggles, we must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism. [...] We must actively work to call attention to the importance of creating a theory that can advance renewed feminist movements, particularly highlighting that theory which seeks to further feminist opposition to sexism, and sexist oppression.[49]

In order to make theory a transformative social practice, hooks recalls how Women's Studies was initially so subversive within academia precisely because feminist thought was able to deny the separation of body/mind and claim wholeness, in order to talk about difference and freedom. These studies had to struggle to be taken seriously in an area where traditional disciplines conceived knowledge and science as disembodied and aseptic. Feminist critical knowledge education, by contrast, had the claim to connect what happened in the classroom in critical dialogue with life and the way of life outside the classroom, not separating theory and the world.

3 Criticisms of the Community and Critical Community

> I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build "community" in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn-to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice.[50]

What we have called here *critical community* emerges in hooks' thinking as a new way of thinking and creating community because it answers the question "how to be together in our difference."[51] In none of her texts do we find an exact and final definition of what community should be, but rather a critique of what it should not be if it wants to come to terms with difference and accept conflict as its constitutive character. From this point of view, it seems to betray the very meaning of community as a political concept,[52] its normative nature, its rigid external and even more internal boundaries. The term "beloved community" is significant because it characterizes the community starting from the relationships it is able to build and not from a specific historical or social identity. The meaning of the term "beloved," however, is more complex than peaceful as it appears. As Toni Morisson suggests, "definitions belong to the definers, not the defined."[53] In this case community is impossible to define insofar as hooks describes it as a political process animated by critical dialogue, the common will to oppose domination and the acceptance of conflict as part of becoming together.

The main characteristics of the "beloved community" or "teaching community" (in other texts "community of care" where "care" has a specific historical and political meaning that goes back to the political role of Black women in the family and in Black community)[54] is change, critical dialogue and "radical openness." There are two historical-political starting points: the Black community as a political experience, what she calls "the Chitlin-circuit," quoting a famous soul food dish, and defining

49. Ibid, 69–70.

50. Ibid, 40.

51. Brosi and hooks, "The Beloved Community," 82–83.

52. Maurizio Ricciardi, *Introduction,* in Ferdinand Toennies, *Community and Society* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2011), 5–15; Maurizio Ricciardi, *La società come ordine* (Macerata: Eum, 2010), 134.

53. Toni Morisson, *Beloved* (New York, NY: Plume, 1998), 190.

54. bell hooks, *Belonging. A Culture of Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 227.

it in a very meaningful way "a world where we had a history,"[55] a community that hooks places in her childhood; and the Black community as a place of change, of conquest, of fight against patriarchy. In this direction, hooks gives the example of the African American community of the 1960s and 1970s,

> it is easy to see that the nationalism of the sixties and seventies was very different from the racial solidarity born of shared circumstance and not from theories of Black power. Not that an articulation of Black power was not important; it was. Only it did not deliver the goods; it was too informed by corrosive power relations, too mythic, to take the place of that concrete relational love that bonded Black folks together in communities of hope and struggle.[56]

The "undermining force of sexism"[57] did not allow the Black power of the 1960s to build a radical solidarity: "Sexism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, enabling white men and Black men to share a common sensibility about sex roles and the importance of male domination."[58] The recognition of the limits and contradictions of the community and its history allows hooks to assign it a further meaning, rooted in the present and in change, understood as a way of being in the world, as a social pedagogy to build a community of critical thinking.[59]

> Keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking. I often talk about radical openness because it became clear to me, after years in academic settings, that it was far too easy to become attached to and protective of one's viewpoint, and to rule out other perspectives. So much academic training encourages teachers to assume that they must be "right" at all times. Instead, I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we do not know.[60]

The community in hooks is therefore both historical and ideal in nature, it is inspired by a past in which Black people built their freedom within a community capable of making Black history exist, and at the same time it is a concept charged with political imagination, where community is not a closed form but a way of being in the world in relation, against all individualism and against the idea that "safety" is more important or useful than "conflict."

> When we teach our students that there is safety in learning to cope with conflict, with differences of thought and opinion, we prepare their minds for radical openness. We teach them that it is possible to learn in diverse teaching settings. And in the long run, by teaching students to value dissent and to treasure critical exchange, we prepare them to face reality.[61]

It is significant that hooks' primary reference here is Martin Luther King. The beloved community, as we have said, is not just the name of the Black community, or what it should become again, nor simply an extension of it, across racial boundaries. There is, hooks asserts, no automatic community. Community arises not just from struggle, as its ultimate outcome, but from "radical openness" understood as the ability to deal with conflict, to accept it as a crucial part of the collective learning process:

> Martin Luther King was my teacher for understanding the importance of beloved community. He had a profound awareness that the people involved in oppressive institutions

55. bell hooks, *Yearning*, 67.

56. Ibid, 69.

57. Ibid, 41.

58. Ibid, 99–100.

59. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), PAGES

60. Ibid, 10.

61. Ibid, 88.

> will not change from the logics and practices of domination without engagement with those who are striving for a better way. One of the things that has always made me sad is the extent to which civil rights struggles, Black power movements, and feminist movements, have, at times, collapsed at the point where there was conflict, and how conflict between people in the groups was often seen as a negative.

The mistake of the movements and the communities they created was to think of conflict positively only outwardly.

> The truth is that you cannot build community without conflict. The issue is not to be without conflict, but to be able to resolve conflict, and the commitment to community is what gives us the inspiration to come up with ways to resolve conflict. The most contemporary way that people are thinking about as a measure of resolving conflict and rebuilding community is restorative justice.[62]

To re-appropriate conflict as a form of knowledge and relationship in order to redefine the central problem of community—"how to be together in our difference"—implies rethinking the latter not as a solution but as a problem to which a political answer must be continually given. This is why the emphasis on dialogue and radical openness dominates hooks' discourse. The beloved community is a path rather than a closed space, constructed in negative, i.e., pure antagonism. It is a place where conflict is present and possible, not destructive, but generative of what we can name political friendship.[63]

The school community during segregation, destroyed by racial integration, the community produced by the Black civil rights movements, the community sought and promoted by feminist and Black movements have in common the fact that they are not only antagonistic, that is, defined by the struggle they take on, but also capable of creating new forms of relationship. hooks on the other hand is not afraid to explicate the limits and obstacles of any community that has as its outcome the closure of identity: "To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination."[64]

Going back to the previous discussion about Women's and Black Studies and movements, this also means that denying race is not enough to eliminate racism and create multicultural communities:

> Clearly, the most powerful indicator that white people wanted to see institutionalized racism end was the overall societal support for desegregation and integration. The fact that many white people did not link this support to ending everyday acts of white-supremacist thought and practice, however, has helped racism maintain its hold on our culture. To break that hold we need continual antiracism activism. We need to generate greater cultural awareness of the way white-supremacist thinking operates in our daily lives. We need to hear from the individuals who know, because they have lived antiracist lives, what everyone can do to decolonize their minds, to maintain awareness, change behavior, and create beloved community.[65]

For hooks, creating learning communities also involves struggling against the schism and dissociation between knowledge and reality imposed by the academy as an institution of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In this direction she calls "democratic education" that practice which can create "intimacy that does not annihilate difference,"[66] a collective space where subjectivities can exist and

62. Brosi and hooks, "The Beloved Community," 76.

63. On this concept, see Pierangelo Schiera, "L'amicizia politica in Francesco Patrizi, senese," in *De Amicitia. Writings dedicated to Arturo Colombo*, eds. Giovanna Angelini and Marina Tesoro (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007), 61–72.

64. bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 36.

65. Ibid, 40.

66. Parker J. Palmer, "The Grace of Great Things: Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning" in *Daily Good* (August 25, 2017): https://www.dailygood.org/story/1685/the-grace-of-great-things-reclaiming-the-sacred-in-knowing-teaching-and-learning-parker-j-palmer/ [retrieved: Feb. 22, 2023].

empower themselves. This goal cannot be achieved simply by mediating between differences or by demarcating areas of conflict as no-go zones or by censoring the true meaning of difference. Radical openness is a horizon of transformative possibilities, because in her conception it "cultivates a spirit of hopefulness about the capacity of individuals to change,"[67] a capacity the learning community, with its conflicts and connections, produces.

hooks' community is thus the name of a problem, of something in the making. A place of transformation that is based not on a once-and-for-all shared doctrine, nor on the irenic illusion of a pacified pluralism, but on critical thinking, i.e., on the recognition of power in its difference from domination and thus on the relationship with embodied otherness.[68]

> All too often we think of community in terms of being with folks like ourselves: the same class, same race, same ethnicity, same social standing and the like. All of us evoke vague notions of community and compassion, yet how many of us compassionately went out to find an intimate other, to bring them here with us today? So that when we looked around, we wouldn't just find a similar kind of class, a similar group of people, people like ourselves: a certain kind of exclusivity.[69]

Radical education is thus not just a way of conceiving teaching but it means creating the conditions for making theory an instrument of transformation of the system in which relationships are reproduced, starting with classroom relationships.[70] In a context where university education is entirely about the future, about preparing for the world of work and earning a better place on the social ladder – following an idea of progress constitutive of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"—, education for freedom has to show that "the present is a place of meaning."[71]

In the 1990s, Black/Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies and Cultural Studies were revamped so that they were no longer subversive, that they could no longer become sites within educational systems where public discourse about freedom and democracy could be constructed, criticized and reinvented. They have invariably been de-radicalized or at best ghettoized, as those teachers and students who choose these paths find themselves to be. How race, class and gender redefine political issues and learning in our society is less and less a question about inequality and its reversal, net of the existing courses on these issues and the presence of these terms in academic research. The principle of equality, hooks wrote, has little meaning in a world where a global oligarchy is taking over,[72] but "despite severe setbacks, there have been and will continue to be constructive radical shifts in the way we teach and learn as minds 'stayed on freedom' teach to transgress and transform."[73]

Since racism, exploitation and patriarchy are real and concrete everyday practices, a political discourse on education is not reducible to mere curricular decisions or to a normative pluralism. hooks' work teaches us to transgress a passive, hierarchical and individualistic idea of knowledge. The critical education she theorized is also a reflection on intellectual life as a political life, one of collective sharing and transformation of the world. This is probably the main reason why, all in all, hooks' voice has remained isolated, and why academic and institutional logics make building a knowledge community an ongoing struggle full of obstacles and limits.

67. bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 73.

68. Ibid, 115.

69. Ibid, 163.

70. bell hooks, *Where We Stand*, 156–164.

71. Ibid, 165–166.

72. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking,* 15.

73. Ibid, 28.