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The Homeplace, the Margin and the Classroom: Mapping Radical Liberation

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Abstract

The homeplace, the margin and the classroom could be conceived as the hallmarks of bell hooks' theoretical reflection on the historical link between space and political resistance. Designed as locations of racial and gender oppression, those spaces have been turned into radical sites of antiracist pedagogy and African American resistance. Hence, mapping these locations of struggle means connecting the historical production of space to the process of radical political subjectification within the African American context. The ultimate intent of the essay is in fact to connect bell hooks' writings on the locations of domination/liberation with the Black Radical Tradition.

Keywords: bell hooks; Black radical tradition; politics of space; antiracist pedagogy; feminism.

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> I have yearned to find my place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place.[1]

1 Introduction

Tracing the impact that bell hooks' critical contribution has had—and continues to have—on radical political theory, feminism, theory of space, radical pedagogy and beyond, would undoubtably be an impossible task. With her unique voice and her steadfast antiracist radical feminist commitment, she was able to craft a deeply insightful reflection on the ways the inner workings of heteropatriarchy, racism and capitalism had been intertwining in the course of US history, problematizing the socio-political and economic effects on the African American communities. Her extensive theoretical production remains a fundamental reference for continuing to envision an antipatriarchal, feminist, anticapitalist and antiracist political praxis.

In this article I will specifically direct my focus on bell hooks' transformative takes on politics of location concerning the African American experience. I am interested in analyzing her inputs in framing the processes of production of space within the political tradition of Black radicalism, by underlining how certain locations—specifically fabricated to confine and oppress—have been transformed into spaces of antiracist pedagogy and radical resistance. Paths of radical political transformation are in fact created when the authority of shaping and narrating the space is questioned, and when the author's dominant position is problematized. This "shift in positionality,"[2] informed by an epistemological practice centered around the Black Radical Tradition, opens up radical possibilities for a renewed theory of space. In this regard, the epistemologies of the African diaspora are a fundamental lens through which to attempt to grasp the contested legacies and claims over space, in a colonial context. My ultimate goal is in fact to place bell hooks' writings on the politics of space within the political framework of the Black Radical Tradition, in order to highlight her theoretical leverage and influence in the ongoing dialogue on the relationship between Black communities and space. To clarify, the Black Radical Tradition can be intended as the theoretical constellation of radical theories, practices, strategies and movements for Black people's liberation and achievement of racial justice. Following the definition given by scholar Cedric Robinson, this political tradition consists of "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."[3] Black Radicalism could therefore be construed as the specific political conscience that has epistemologically informed the multiplicity of theories and practices of struggle throughout African American history, intimately to the transformation of space.[4] Hence my intention is to position bell hooks' contribution within this political history.

2 Insurgent Geographies of the African Diaspora

In his work titled *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, the Jamaican poet Kei Miller illustrates how people's interactions with their surroundings are determined by the historical and experiential knowledge they possess about the place in question. This knowledge is informed by the historical modalities through which certain people have encountered the space they are in and participated in the process of shaping it and being shaped by it. Naturally, there are various ways to know, inhabit, name, and narrate the space, depending on the underlying—peaceful or violent—phenomena that

1. bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.
2. Ibid, 105.
3. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171.
4. Cf. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

have molded the relationship between people and place. Miller's work is centered around a conversation between a Western cartographer and a Jamaican Rastaman who discuss their different ways of knowing and relating to the place. The first claims that there is an unbiased method of knowing, systematizing, and representing the space, the latter instead insists on the inescapable complexity of the intricate historical interweaving of space matters and African people's experiences on the island. The official geography of the mapmaker is characterized by rigid parameters and a predetermined ethnographic approach that ultimately shows its limitations in what Édouard Glissant defined "the insistence of fixing the object of scrutiny in static time, thereby removing the tangled nature of lived experience."[5] The Rastaman, on the other hand, retraces the island's landscape through the history of the slave trade, slavery and *maroonage*, and is concerned about the cartographer's work, as he wonders "if on his map he made our roads a little/ smoother, a little straighter, as in drawing/ he might erase a small bit of history's disgrace."[6] The epistemological fracture between the two ways of reasoning is evident, as the mapmaker conceives the land as an element that can be scientifically known, measured and framed via a methodical approach and an aseptic eye. He sees the land as a neutral body to be examined and mapped by using analytic categorizations and standardized methods of drawing and representing it, disregarding the ways in which locals have come to know the place, give names to it, imagine it and constantly renegotiate their relationship with it. What the mapmaker cannot grasp is the fact that the landscape is a monument of colonial domination and anticolonial resistance; to say it with Glissant once again, "[the landscape] is all history,"[7] and this history is a present condition that periodically redefines the space. The locals had in fact forged other ways to make sense of the place, survive on that territory and challenge the colonial worldview on land, ownership, and human interaction with the place. Therefore, the space cannot be considered as an empty, stable and unchangeable scenery to be crystalized on paper once and for all; it cannot be seen as an enclosed vessel in which history simply unfolds. On the contrary, it is a mutable element, as humans recurrently produce it, name it and give meaning to it.

Across the African diaspora, the space holds an array of highly unique connotations, marked by a specific genesis—forced displacement, human captivity, segregation and socio-economic exploitation—and consequently African populations had to develop distinct ways of living and moving through it:

> Historical and contemporary Black geographies surface and centralize the notion that Black diaspora populations have told and are telling how their surroundings have shaped their lives. These connections flag, for example, the middle passage, expressive cultures, and the plantation on historio-experiential terms, spatializing Black histories and lives, which are underwritten by the displacement of difference. It is important, then, to recognize that Black Atlantic cultures have always had an intimate relationship with geography.[8]

Feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick in fact explains that the relationship between Black populations and geography—intended not only in terms of physical space and locations, but also as imaginative conformations of spatial organization—is the key to read Black histories and Black subjectivities in the Atlantic world. Geographic paradigms of colonial domination had shaped a sense of space characterized by explorations, lands to conquer, conceptualizations of property and ownership rights, nation building processes, physical borders and symbolic lines, and people's objectification and exploitation: a white masculine European mapping.[9] However, locations of colonial domination have not only been the place of white geography's progress and exploration, they have also been the cruxes of the elaboration and production of new geographies of liberation: the slave ship, the plantation, the ghetto,

5. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia Press, 1994), 14.

6. Kei Miller, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), 29.

7. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 11.

8. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxi.

9. Ibid, x.

the prison, all fabricated as geographic centers of captivity, have been transformed into sites of resistance. For this reason, it is paramount to get inside the geographic discourses and histories produced by the African diaspora, as they have contested and reshaped colonial cartographic rules. Arbitrarily constructed and integrated in the disciplinary canon, those rules have "unjustly organize[d] human hierarchies in place,"[10] and marked Black people as "ungeographic" subjects, by cutting the connection to their homeplace and constantly reminding them of their extraneity and non-belonging to the new world into which they were forcibly transplanted.

Colonial explorations and conquests in the Americas—but not exclusively, of course—have contributed to cementing certain universal characteristics for defining and categorizing space and its socio-political organization. Concepts as *terra nullius*, property, sovereignty, ownership (of lands and bodies) can be considered as distinctive hallmarks of colonial domination over extra-European territories. In this regard, the role of explorers and cartographers was undoubtably essential, as they were the ones who "studied" the territory and ascertained the habitability of these presumed unpopulated empty areas. In the specific case of settler colonial ventures in North America, colonial domination was carried out through specific geo-racial arrangements. The occupation of indigenous' lands, the demarcation of borders and the socio-political and cultural reorganization of those lands in conformity to settlers' worldview was made possible by employing racialized captive and genocidal practices. Settlers' redefinition of the role of space within their society passed through a racialized understanding of humanity, a taxonomic process projected directly onto the landscape: "Humanness became a classificatory text, distinguishing white, native (non-white), African (native/Other/nigger) from one another and identifying subtypes of human Otherness, such as class, gender, sexuality."[11] The relationship of each category of people to the place was determined by the settlers' design of white society. In fact, according to their race, people were situated in certain specific locations which mirrored their positions in the socio-economic societal order: Native Americans in reservations, African slaves in the plantations. The racism and sexism embedded in those systems of colonial domination allowed forms of conquests, dispossession, captivity, exploitation, and elimination to govern and arrange people's lives in place. Those locations of sexual and racist violence—the slave ship, the plantation, the reservation, the segregated neighborhood, the prison—not only work as sites of reification of the subjects who underwent them, erasing their right to the place, they also represent the re-actualization of conquest and possession exercised by the settlers, planters, and masters:

> Bodily violence spatializes other locations of dehumanization and restraint, rendering bodily self-possession and other forms of spatial ownership virtually unavailable to the violated subject. One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race is through multiscalar discourses of ownership: having "things," owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest.[12]

According to McKittrick, geographies of colonial domination are essential points of analysis because they concurrently contain the genesis and development of gendered and racialized social orders, as well as the resistance and struggle against them. Settler society, the plantation socio-economic structure, the Jim Crow system, the prison-industrial complex are all spatial manifestations of racism. What Black diasporic subjectivities have been doing is precisely questioning these spatial arrangements, ripping up the maps, and providing different geographic trajectories towards a human relationship with the place that is not based on racialized system of oppression: "the sites/citations of struggle indicate that traditional geographies, and their attendant hierarchical category of humanness, cannot do the emancipatory work some subjects demand."[13] It is in this interstice that Black human geography and radical theory converge. Black people's research and creation of what bell hooks defined as a culture of place—intended as a way of establishing the presence, "claiming the earth, creating a sense

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid, 130.

12. Ibid, 3.

13. Ibid, xix.

of belonging"[14]—has involved the constant rearticulation of radical theories and practices of struggle within and beyond the sites of racist and sexist domination. The holds of the slave ships, the plantation fields, the margins, the prison cells have been transformed into locations where radical practices are produced. Black people's political imagination, furthermore, succeeded in creating brand-new spatial organizations on the basis of radical theories of liberation. In fact, maroons' societies, Emancipation's promised land, Reconstruction's collectivized lands, the homeplace, the Black Panther Party (BPP)'s self-organized communities, the Republic of New Afrika (RNA)'s dream of a Black nation are all geographic expressions of Black radical subjectivities. Ultimately, the Black radical culture of place demonstrates that African diasporic populations are significant geographic subjects as they have been critiquing canonical geography, contesting geographies of colonial domination, expressing their geographic knowledge, producing space and writing human geographies:

> Dislocation and displacement, the historical schema and the mapping of man's inhumanity to man have all "placed" and bound Blackness through the discourses of race, racism, and essentialism. Many Black responses to this spatialization of difference radically oppose geographies that objectify their sense of self and humanity. A different sense of place, then, is mapped—materially and imaginatively—through heterogeneous representational texts and geographies.[15]

It is in this political and theoretical framework that I am building on bell hooks' perspective on the production of radical locations. By following her theorizations on the homeplace, the margins and the classroom, it is possible to comprehend how radical political education unfolded in those locations of domination and has continued to be the foundation for the grassroots movements that followed.

3 Learning from Home: The Domestic Space as a Location of Resistance

Radical conceptualizations of space have constituted a significant aspect of the theoretical production and practical experimentation of Black Radicalism. Following the definition given by scholar Cedric Robinson, Black Radicalism consists of "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."[16] Far from being any sort of abstraction, the Black Radical Tradition qualifies as a dynamic and fluid process of continuous reinvention of theories and practices of struggle originated from "collective rather than individualistic imperatives"[17] entrenched in African epistemologies. Therefore, Black Radicalism places the epistemological variety Black slaves carried with them as the actual genesis of Black historical geography in the Atlantic world and as the founding element of the Black Radical Tradition. This political tradition properly reclaims African populations as "producers of material and cultural wealth, as producers of ideologies and epistemologies, as producers of history."[18] This geographical dimension is at this point fundamental for reading the history of the Black Radical Tradition, since Black epistemologies in the Atlantic universe are indissolubly grounded in spaces and places: "Black lives are necessarily geographic."[19] That is to say that practices of resistance and survival enacted by Black people since their arrival in the American continent cannot be separated from the production of space—considering that the development

14. hooks, *Belonging*, 2.

15. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 34.

16. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 171.

17. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Foreword," in *Cedric J. Robinson on Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Culture of Resistance*, ed. H.L.T. Quan (London: Pluto Press, 2019), xii.

18. Cedric J. Robinson, "Notes Toward a 'Native Theory of History'," in *Cedric J. Robinson on Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Culture of Resistance, ed.* H.L.T. Quan (London: Pluto Press), 22.

19. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

of political subjectivities and social movements is embedded in the political and social space, and for this reason "Black matters are spatial matters."[20]

The diasporic and therefore transnational character of the African American experience serves precisely to configure a political restructuring of the world free from the immutability and steadiness of national identities. For this reason, the theoretical production of concepts such as "resistance" and "culture of resistance," in the situated experience of the African American thought, has followed a specific trajectory. Reflecting on the politics of Black subjectivity, in her work *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* bell hooks explained that "resistance" is a highly complex concept, not easy to define; a concept whose meaning shifts in relation to the political and historical context. It is complicated to define resistance precisely because it emerges from momentary reactions of rage or resentment, caused by circumstantial events. It can lead to rebellions even though they might be brief, contingent and provisional. Accordingly, resistance is not a synonym of "becoming subject." In other words, an act of resistance does not necessarily entail a process of subjectification:

> that process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined."[21]

Therefore, the infrapolitics of resistance can ignite the spark of subjectification processes if the materiality of those acts is channeled into political trajectories that challenge the system of oppression in place. In the case of African American history, this infrapolitical dimension has been shaped by a variety of daily practices of resistance against forms of everyday racial discrimination and oppression: the so-called "hidden transcript"[22] of behaviors, codes, languages, and symbols of resistance. Over time, these daily practices of resistance were organized in a structured culture of dissidence which became the political fuel for liberation struggles to "envision new strategies and to talk about Black subjectivity in a visionary manner."[23] When combined to a deep understanding of the structures of domination and coordinated into organized movements, practices of resistance can therefore lead to radical transformations of the social and political (and spatial) order. bell hooks' theorization of the political function of the homeplace streams from here, from her personal experience in the segregated South, where Black people's survival was tragically linked to a violent imposition of a racist spatial organization and accessibility to place.

In fact, once the radical promises of Reconstruction had been crushed by the resurgence of racist discourses and institutions that eventually took the shape of the Jim Crow system of racial apartheid, African Americans had to reconsider their approaches to the fight for racial justice. Considering the dangers and the blind violence of the system of racial segregation—aggravated by the resurgence of the KKK and lynching as institutionalized methods of racial terror—the daily practices of resistance had to assume different forms. In such an oppressive and limiting social environment as that established by Jim Crow system, the only safe space African Americans had to shelter themselves from racism was the homeplace. Consequently, the house became the most protected and adequate space for reformulating strategies of struggle and strengthening the vision for liberation. As bell hooks reminds us, the greatest contribution to the reformulation of solidarity practices and the restoration of the culture of resistance came from Black women:

> Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty,

20. Ibid.

21. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 39–40.

22. Robin D.G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," in *The Journal of American History* 80, 1 (June 1993): 77.

23. hooks, *Yearning*, 41.

> hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of Black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and in doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by Black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.[24]

African American feminism played a central role in theorizing the reconfiguration of spaces of resistance in the Jim Crow South and the resignification of the domestic not as just a place of gender oppression—as many white feminists had theorized—but as the potential place to deal with and heal from the pain and distress of racism. During segregation, the homeplace turned out to be the space where rage and anger against the system and the materiality of racism were substantially transformed into a political project of resistance. In their homeplace, Black people were able to address all the issues that were affecting their daily lives and come up with politically organized solutions. It was the crucial site where a political solidarity could be built, the system of oppression of whiteness could be discussed and understood, new paths for racial liberation could be imagined and practiced: from self-recovery to the construction of a radical subjectivity though the reconfiguration of the culture of resistance. However, the political power the homeplace came to represent is not meant to conceal the complexity of family relations in the African American community, especially in the rural South, where bell hooks herself grew up. In fact, in her memoir *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), she vividly recalls the harsh reality of her childhood and adolescence. Her household was definitely a place of gendered and sexist oppression, internalized racial inferiority and patriarchal—sometimes abusive—domination and control.[25] It is relevant, in this regard, to acknowledge and address the sexism and patriarchal power within the African American community. In point of fact, the struggle for racial justice has quite often been characterized by political positions that have supported what feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw defined "defensive priorities that marginalize Black women,"[26] erasing the intersectional dimension of Black women's lives. That is to say that, frequently, Black women's political needs and interests have been overlooked and classified as non-priorities in the struggle for liberation, as "the struggle against racism seemed to compel the subordination of certain aspects of the Black female experience in order to ensure the security of the larger Black community."[27] The same point can be made in relation to the issue of domestic violence. As Kimberlé Crenshaw once again explained, the question of domestic violence within nonwhite communities is not seriously faced nor publicly discussed as it should be, mostly because "people of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intracommunity problems."[28] The fear of meeting racial stereotypes and the idea of failing to fulfill the rule of respectability politics have prevented the antiracist practice from systematically approaching the pressing problem of violence against women of color and the patriarchal power at the roots:

> The more promising political imperative is to challenge the legitimacy of such power expectations by exposing the dysfunctional and debilitating effect on families and communities of color. Moreover, while understanding links between racism and domestic violence is an important component of any affective intervention strategy, it is also clear

24. hooks, *Yearning*, 78.

25. bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 146–147.

26. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, 1, 8 (1989): 162.

27. Ibid, 163.

28. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 46, 6 (July 1991): 1256.

> that women of color need not await the ultimate triumph over racism before they can expect to live violence-free lives.[29]

This is the political stand bell hooks took in her memoir, describing and exposing the domestic violence happening in her household. She deeply and powerfully engaged with her past, recognizing the brutality of her conditions but also finding ways to heal through her writing. Her personal story encouraged her to reflect not only on the complexity of racial and gender relations in the Black family but also on the potential of radical opposition the Black community could intimately build, especially when she looked at the women in her family.

According to bell hooks in fact, Black women played a paramount social and political function. They were the ones who created and protected the domesticity, which became the fertile soil for a strong antiracist pedagogy: the homeplace as a space not only for sharing fears, concerns, anger and sorrow but also for passing on theories and practices of struggle down to new generations, which ultimately is the material function of the Black Radical Tradition. Home in the South morphed into the political location of learning, the space in which Black youths could rediscover their history and acquire political knowledge not just to survive Jim Crow, but also to imagine ways to destroy it:

> When Black women renew our political commitment to homeplace, we can address the needs and concerns of young Black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition. Together, Black women can renew our commitment to Black liberation struggle, sharing insights and awareness, sharing feminist thinking and feminist vision, building solidarity.[30]

Furthermore, the political relevance of building and preserving a private domestic space traveled from the segregated agrarian South to the Northern industrial districts during the years of the Great Migration.[31] It is conceivable to argue that the epistemological and political legacy of the Southern lessons learned at home in fact worked as the theoretical foundation of what was to become the expression of Black radical movements in the 1960s. The political education the homeplace provided was indeed fundamental in channeling the rage and the frustration Black people were experiencing in the urban ghettoes into a defined political movement based on self-identity and self-determination for Black communities to seek political, social, and economic control of their own spaces. Thus, bell hooks' homeplace appears as the location in which a profound reformulation of Black radical subjectivity occurred, the site that ultimately created the conditions for the birth of a renewed, collectively shared, sense of belonging to a place.

4 Telling the Story of Resistance: Writing from the Margins

A similar political and social function was also held by the margin—intended not only as a physical location of segregation, set by racial, social and gender boundaries, but also as a form of aesthetic and epistemological confinement. The margin—embodied by the segregated space in the South and by the urban ghetto in the North—worked as a device of social control and confinement of Black populations through legal apparatuses, social practices and urban policies. Furthermore, it also functioned as an attempt to enclose and suppress the epistemological dimension—"the power of knowing"[32]—and the political and aesthetical expressions of Black folks. The margins of the ghetto were shaped by a set of racist practices and policies aimed at controlling and isolating African Americans, both on

29. Ibid, 1258.

30. hooks, *Yearning*, 88.

31. A slow-paced dislocation of African Americans from the South to Northern, Midwestern and Western states, that began at the beginning of the XX century and lasted several decades, it counted the movement of about six million people, irreversibly changing the urban face of the country. Data collected from the government archives of African American History can be accessed here: https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration, retrieved September 6, 2022.

32. hooks, *Yearning*, 223.

an individual or at community and governmental levels. These practices consisted of open physical racial violence, such as mob violence, house bombing and microaggressions, but also discriminatory procedures, such as the "improvement associations"—white residents' organizations working to prevent Black people from renting or buying houses in white residential areas. In addition, there were restrictive covenants, blockbusting, and, of course, colorblind government policies on local and federal levels, that fortified residential marginalization and social and economic exclusion.[33] In fact, despite the *Fair Housing Act* of 1968, segregation survived and continued to be practiced, reaching even greater dimensions. According to sociologists Massey and Denton, the *Fair Housing Act* allowed what they called "segregation with a smile,"[34] because whilst explicitly forbidding racial segregation, it left a legal void for other types of behaviors that left racist discrimination unchanged.

The fabrication of the Black ghetto was therefore the ultimate result of all these urban and economic policies, neoliberal rule, and racist and segregationist practices and behaviors that fostered and maintained residential and social marginalization. In this context of high social and racial tensions, the Black Power Movement made its way. This movement, sustained by a constellation of different organizations, reflected on the situation of Black people living in ghettoes by analyzing the condition of their economic exploitation:

> This is why the society does nothing meaningful about institutional racism: because the Black community has been the creation of, and dominated by, a combination of oppressive forces and special interests in the white community. The groups which have access to the necessary resources and the ability to effect change benefit politically and economically from the continued subordinate status of the Black community […] Institutional racism has been maintained deliberately by the power structure through indifference, inertia and lack courage on the part of white masses as well as petty officials. Whenever Black demands for change become loud and strong, indifference is replaced by active opposition based on fear and self-interest. The line between purposeful suppression and indifference blurs. One way or another, most whites participate in economic colonialism.[35]

The Black Power Movement was therefore able to voice the frustration, the sense of despair and anger of Black communities all over the country, especially those in the northern city ghettoes, and to direct the acts of resistance into a defined political program. Black Power underlined the importance of political and epistemological self-awareness, and it stressed the relevance of political identity built around the history of the Black Radical Tradition as the first step toward racial justice. Black Power maintained the urgency of racial solidarity as the precondition for generating significant transformations in society, starting from the culture of resistance African Americans had been building since the first kidnappings on the African shores. The goal of the Black Power Movement was to use "the dynamite"[36] of the ghettoes, the rage that ignited the wave of urban riots, to destroy the institutions of racism, and to arrest the reproduction of systems of racial oppression by any means necessary. It is precisely in relation to this specific political and cultural scenario that I situate bell hooks' reflection on the centrality of positionality and lived experience in a certain space. In this regard, I should clarify that I am well aware of bell hooks' extensive critique of the sexist and patriarchal attitude of many male leaders and militants of the 1960s movements, as she eloquently pointed out and thoroughly analyzed in *Ain't I a Woman* (1992). She firmly contested the image of Black masculinity that some of those movements pushed forward and the fact that they "accepted violence as the primary way to assert power,"[37] even at the expense of Black women. Not to disregard this highly relevant

33. Cf. David Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (London: Verso, 2008).

34. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 98.

35. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 22.

36. Ibid, 160.

37. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 99.

analysis—which would need a much wider space to be accurately dealt with—my focus here is rather to establish a dialogue between Black radical theory and bell hooks' reflections on the understanding of the marginal experience. She in fact writes that social and political places of enunciation and geographic locations are the elements that define people's experience of space, which is "not the same for those of us from poor backgrounds who have had to continually engage in actual political struggle both within and outside Black communities to assert an aesthetic and critical presence."[38] This process of claiming one's own situated existence in a certain space passes through a radical critique of and opposition against the system of domination in place. For bell hooks, the margin therefore constitutes a preferential location from which to observe the reality of segregation and to deeply understand the relationship between the edge of the world and the center. It was a place from which to profoundly perceive and acquire knowledge of the racist roots of Jim Crow and the hierarchical structure of whiteness, in order to open spaces of radical possibilities:

> We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.[39]

Hence, marginality is not exclusively a place of oppression and deprivation. Fabricated as such, it was transformed into "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse."[40] The margin is the place where political resistance sprouted, it is the location in which the history of Black radical theories and practices unfolded, therefore it is "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist."[41] In the South as in the North, the margin was the battleground of the antiracist struggle, the political laboratory from which radical movements emerged. In bell hooks' perspective, however, the margin is not exclusively a physical space, it is also an imaginative one. She is specifically referring to the political capacity of absorbing the lived experience of the marginal positionality and the history of the Radical Tradition born with it within one's consciousness, and critically reasoning from that place of the mind. By recalling the physical marginal space and the political lessons learned there, bell hooks argues that marginality can be built as political and cultural positionality, from which to think, work, write, imagine, produce. Even if one gets away from the material marginality, "the awareness of the necessity of opposition,"[42] in the form of a conscious space of rejection and a voice of resistance, will inform their political grammar and praxis. Far from being an attempt to romanticize social and racial marginality, bell hooks explains that "these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression we know better the margin as site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance."[43] As the Black Power Movement showed, the political practices that formed and thrived in the margins of US ghettoes, were able to interrupt the narration of degradation and despair of the marginalized communities that lived there; they appropriated that space to say no to racist oppression and claim the right to tell their story of resistance, asserting their epistemological and aesthetic sense of the place; and finally they transformed it into a base for collective liberation. When the margin as a violent imposition is turned into a chosen location, as resistance sparks from it, "we are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world."[44]

38. hooks, *Yearning*, 228.
39. Ibid, 229.
40. Ibid, 230.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid, 232.
44. Ibid, 235.

5 Beyond the Absence: Epistemic Justice and Radical Pedagogy

"Carry on the tradition"[45] is the refrain Assata Shakur repeatedly asserts in her poem "The Tradition," in the concluding pages of her autobiography. Despite being succinct, the poem properly represents the historical and political trajectory of the Black Radical Tradition, highlighting its spatial, theoretical and cultural hallmarks. Particularly interesting is the way she describes the locations of struggle; Shakur's vision is in fact definitely transnational:

> "There were Black People since the childhood of time / who carried it on. / In Ghana and Mali and Timbuktu / we carried it on. / Carried on the Tradition."[46]

By locating the origins of Black radicalism precisely in West Africa, she underlines how some freedom practices were carried from one continent to another. Shakur writes "we hid in the bush/when the slavemasters came"[47] referring to the fugitive enclaves present across West Africa, where runaways and migrants used to seek refuge from slave raiders, in this way building strong community ties. This fugitive dream crossed the waters, and it became the most consistent and widespread form of organized resistance on the American continent carried out by runaway slaves: the maroon society. Shakur then moves onto another site of struggle: the slave ship. She evokes the *Middle Passage* and the motley crews that took over the Atlantic and rebelled against their destiny designed by the economy of the slave trade. The fugitive thread continues in the following verses, where Shakur mentions the Underground Railroad—the complex clandestine network that helped runaway slaves escaping the Southern plantations and moving northbound—as an innovation of the Tradition. The transnational and diasporic character of the Black freedom struggle then reappears in the final verses, where Shakur stresses the global scale of Black resistance, presenting a chartography of struggle against colonial violence that goes from "the cold Mississippi midnights/pitting shotguns against lynch mobs" to "the burning Brooklyn streets"; from Selma and San Juan to Mozambique and Mississippi, from Brazil to Boston.[48]

She goes on to distinctly frame the ultimate locations of radical politics in the Black Radical Tradition: the classrooms, the churches, the courtrooms and the prisons.[49] Those are the centers of political organization, theorization and action that so symbolically and essentially represent the making of the Black Liberation Movement. I am analyzing Assata Shakur's poem precisely to reflect on the question of epistemic justice and the role of knowledge in the struggle for liberation. According to Shakur, using history as a political resource is the precondition for self-determination: "I felt, and I still feel, that is necessary for Black revolutionaries to come together, analyze our history, our present condition, and to define ourselves and our struggle. Black self-determination is a basic right, and if we do not have the right to determine our destinies, then who does?"[50] In this regard, Shakur acknowledges the reproduction of epistemic violence in the school system, since many Black children grow up with misconceptions and knowledge gaps concerning African American history and US history at large. Therefore, bringing the history of oppression as the history of political and cultural resistance to the classroom is definitely a relevant step for building an antiracist pedagogical praxis. The radical movements of the 1960s understood this, as they pushed for a deep dive into the journey of the Black Radical Tradition, retelling, recalling and readapting political knowledge for their own objectives. The classroom was in fact one of the locations where this process occurred. Many radical groups acknowledged that political education should have been the primary stage of the antiracist struggle for racial justice, which is why creating spaces where they could learn from and teach to their local communities was paramount. Building an antiracist pedagogy was therefore a fundamental strategy for the structuring of radical movements.

45. Assata Shakur, *An Autobiography* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 375–378.

46. Ibid, 375.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid, 377.

49. Ibid, 376.

50. Ibid, 276.

bell hooks herself wrote extensively about education, drawing from her experience as both a Black female student in mostly white universities and as a feminist and antiracist teacher and scholar. In her work *Teaching to Transgress*, she delivers a very insightful commentary on the purpose and strategies of education, underlying practices and critical reflections on radical pedagogy. Once again, the issue of positionality—intended both as the place of enunciation shaped by lived experiences and as the actual position one holds in a certain codified space, as the classroom is—appears central in her reasoning in relation to the educational practice. Being aware of one's own positionality in regard to knowledge and how knowledge is produced is fundamental for a critical educational and learning process. According to bell hooks, in fact, the classroom could be "the most radical space of possibility in the academia"[51] if the pedagogical practice is renewed in a way that can break the boundaries to create new visions, a "teaching that enables transgressions"[52] and free critical thinking. In order to achieve that, however, it is essential to bring the narratives from the margins to inside the classroom walls. It is not just a matter of locating the absence of Black epistemologies and stories of resistance within the classroom, but also of problematizing the colonial violence behind this act of concealing, hiding, trivializing, mystifying. Aiming for epistemic justice while teaching and learning is therefore the way to resist against normative discourses and historical representations, mobilizing the need to rediscover and reclaim certain knowledge that underwent processes of erasure and silencing. Liberating knowledge and the freedom of producing it by looking back at the long antiracist tradition is the political posture for achieving a critical pedagogical practice:

> The emphasis on education as necessary for liberation that Black people made in slavery and then on into reconstruction informed our lives. And so Freire's emphasis on education as the practice of freedom made such immediate sense to me. Conscious of the need for literacy from girlhood, I took with me to the university memories of reading to folks, of writing for folks. I took with me memories of Black teachers in the segregated school system who had been critical pedagogues providing us liberatory paradigms.[53]

Here, bell hooks specifically mentions the teaching practices during segregation in the South. She stresses how those schools became political laboratories of an antiracist practice, precisely because the long history of antiracist struggles inhabited the pedagogical methods. A decolonized pedagogy is a critical political stand that rejects the ways through which education was established as the central apparatus of the reproduction of determined power relations and dominant representations. Because of this, the history of antiracist struggle is fundamental in the process of creating insurgent practices in the classroom. Hence, an engaged pedagogy is deeply informed by a political commitment to work against the grain, to reach that "shift in location" that can lead students and teachers to challenge the epistemological status quo, to transgress the educational norms that placed the white worldview at the center of the discourse, as the only true and valuable form of knowledge.

Like the homeplace and the margin, the classroom also has the potential to become a place of liberation. It can be transformed from a location marked by epistemic violence into a site of critical thinking, as it is informed by a multifaceted experiences and stories of resistance.

The relationship between politics and space therefore remains central when addressing the history of African American political resistance. bell hooks' contributions thus continue to inspire and help us to envision a culture of place that is antiracist, anticapitalist and antipatriarchal, committed to epistemic and racial justice:

> I believe that we can restore our hope in a world that transcends race by building communities where self- esteem comes not from feeling superior to any group but from one's relationship to the land, to the people, to the place wherever that may be. When we create beloved community, environments that are antiracist and inclusive, it need not matter

51. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid, 51.

whether those spaces are diverse. What matters is that, should difference enter the world of beloved community, it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong.[54]

54. hooks, *Belonging*, 230.