

Critical Perspectives on
bell hooks

Edited by
Maria del Guadalupe Davidson
and George Yancy

A vertical ladder with approximately 15 rungs is positioned against a heavily textured, mottled brown and tan wall. The ladder is centered horizontally in the lower half of the image. The wall's texture is rough and uneven, with various shades of earthy tones. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a somber and contemplative atmosphere.

Critical Perspectives on bell hooks

“Critical Perspectives on bell hooks is a powerful tribute to a living pedagogy that courageously unearths the destructive ideologies of oppression and human suffering, in an effort to fully embody the vitality of our human possibilities. These critically raw and heartfelt essays not only illuminate the genius of bell hooks, but also paint a vivid portrait of the ways in which our lives must serve as the entrance to political consciousness and the key to decolonizing our world.”

—Antonia Darder, Professor of Educational Policy Studies
and Latino/a Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

“Davidson and Yancy have pulled together an impressive array of scholars from around the globe who declare—in vivid and compelling fashion—the importance of bell hooks’s work. Her views on critical pedagogy and praxis, the dynamics of race and gender, and the need for holistic healing spiritually and culturally make hooks an intellectual phenomenon. Critical Perspectives on bell hooks is a must-read.”

—Carol E. Henderson, Associate Director and Professor of Black American
Studies and Associate Professor of English, University of Delaware

Although bell hooks has long challenged the dominant paradigms of race, class, and gender, there has never been a comprehensive book critically reflecting upon this seminal scholar’s body of work. Her written works aim to transgress and disrupt those codes that exclude others as intellectually mediocre, and hooks’s challenge to various hegemonic practices has heavily influenced scholars in numerous areas of inquiry. This important resource thematically examines hooks’s works across various disciplinary divides, including her critique on educational theory and practice, theorization of racial construction, dynamics of gender, and spirituality and love as correctives in postmodern life. Ultimately, this book offers a fresh perspective for scholars and students wanting to engage in the prominent work of bell hooks, and makes available to its readers the full significance of her work. Compelling and unprecedented, *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* is a must-read for scholars, professors, and students interested in issues of race, class, and gender.

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George Yancy teaches in the Philosophy Department at Duquesne University.

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Edited by

**Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and
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I dedicate this book to my husband Dr. Scott C. Davidson (mi amor); our three children Yannick Rex, Kolya Gray, and Yelena May (my heart's joy); my sisters: Norma, Rosalina, Lola, Cecelia, and Patricia (warriors) and my brothers: Mario and Enrique (good men), to my mother Florence (patient). And finally, I dedicate this book to all of the brothas and sistas on the South Side of Syracuse, NY. Despite it all, there remains a lot of hope in the hood (peace).

—Maria del Guadalupe Davidson

There are some people who enter our lives as if by grand design. James G. Spady is such a person. His scholarly work is bold and pathbreaking. As far as agency goes, I have never met a scholar whose work and life embodies so superlatively practices of freedom. Hence, it is with utmost respect that I dedicate this book to my friend, colleague, and mentor, James G. Spady.

—George Yancy

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Series Editor's Introduction

During the years immediately after the military government was forced out, I began going to Brazil to work with unions, ministry of education officials from the Workers Party, radical scholar/activists, and others. At this time, I also became close to the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. Paulo was the very model of the organic intellectual. He was deeply committed and was a person with such a deep understanding of an entire range of cultural, political, philosophical, religious, historical, and educational material and realities that he was able to cut through the artificial boundaries that prevent all too many people from seeing the oppressive relations that organize and disorganize the world in which we live. At the same time, he was a wonderful teacher who was also willing (a better word here is *eager*) to learn from criticism. And as time went on, we became friends.

I do not have the same kind of relationship with bell hooks. Indeed, if truth be told, although I have been in the audience a number of times when she has spoken, we have never actually met. Yet, even though the comparison doesn't do justice to the crucial role her writing and speaking has played for so many people here and abroad, in many ways she has taken on part of the role of Paulo Freire in the United States (see, e.g., hooks 1994). Her work is wide-ranging, powerful in its indictment of relations of exploitation and domination, appropriately personal and political at one and the same time, and written in a way that provides space for real people to find their own lives spoken to in her voice. This takes a good deal of talent and commitment, things that bell hooks clearly has in abundance.

I am not alone in my respect for her, of course. Her analyses of "our" society and her interruptions of taken-for-granted ways of thinking about the multiple realities of dominance and subordination and about struggles against them have provided many people with necessary tools. Yet, she does more. She also enables oppressed peoples to envision counterhegemonic actions, and in the process legitimates these actions.

Because hooks's writing has been extensive and has cut across traditional boundaries in many fields, a volume that gives us a better sense of her arguments and influences would be a significant contribution. This is what Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy give us in the book you are about to read. In its wide-ranging assessment of hooks and her contributions to critical pedagogy, to critical analyses of race and gender, and to our understanding of the personal and the spiritual, the various authors collected here give us a much clearer picture of what bell hooks has done and why she has proven to be so influential.

But just as importantly, the book is not simply hagiography. This is not simply a tribute to bell hooks for her contributions, although that would be deserved. It is a critical yet supportive interrogation of what her work means in a large array of areas. Too many commentators on an author's work seem to believe that the task is

simply to ratify an author's arguments. This is more than a little naïve and actually is rather *dis-respectful*. No, the way to show respect for someone's contributions is to take them seriously—to think publicly about the text; to affirm what is powerful and illuminating, to engage in the creative act of supportive criticism; to understand that critical work is a fully *collective* enterprise where such criticism is to be welcomed as part of the dialogue that leads to better analysis and wiser actions.

Elsewhere, I have argued that there are seven tasks in which critical analysis (and the critical analyst) in the cultural, political, and economic spheres of society must engage (Apple in press; see also, Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009).

1. It must "bear witness to negativity." That is, one of its primary functions is to illuminate the ways in which educational, cultural, social, and economic policy and practice are connected to the multiple relations of exploitation and domination—and to struggles against such relations—in the larger society.
2. In engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action.
3. At times, this also requires a redefinition of what counts as "research." This requires acting as "secretaries" to those groups of people and social movements that are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power or in what elsewhere has been called "nonreformist reforms" (see, e.g., Apple and Beane 2007; Apple and Buras 2006).
4. Following Gramsci (1971), one of the tasks of truly counterhegemonic educational and cultural work is not to throw out "elite knowledge," but to reconstruct its form and content so that it serves genuinely progressive social needs.
5. In the process, critical work has the task of keeping traditions of radical work alive. But it also means being reflexive. Thus, it involves being cautious of reductionism and essentialism and asks us to pay attention to what Fraser has called both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition (Fraser 1997).
6. Keeping traditions alive and also supportively criticizing them when they are not adequate to deal with current realities cannot be done unless we ask, "For whom are we keeping them alive?" and "How and in what form are they to be made available?" This requires the relearning or development and use of varied or new skills of working at many levels with multiple groups. Thus, journalistic and media skills, academic and popular skills, and the ability to speak to very different audiences are increasingly crucial.
7. Finally, critical scholar/activists must *act* in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports or in movements against the ideological assumptions and policies they critically analyze.

These seven tasks are demanding and no one person can engage equally well in all of them simultaneously. But bell hooks comes as close as anyone I know in doing a considerable number of them.

This sense of complexity and of difference does not make hooks into what Charles Mills, himself an eminent critical analyst of race (see Mills 1997), calls a

“university postmodernist.” Even though at times hooks seems quite sympathetic to many postmodern and poststructural claims about, say, identity, difference, and discourse—like the noted African American scholar/activist Cornel West and the British Afro-Caribbean scholar/activist Stuart Hall to whom she bears some political and intellectual resemblance (see, e.g., hooks and West 1991; Morley and Chen 1996)—bell hooks is “wary...of the self-indulgences and academic language games of university postmodernism” (Mills 2007, 136). But clearly, neither is hooks a traditional kind of Marxist. Hers is a heterodox, not orthodox position, something for which I too have a good deal of sympathy (Apple 2006). And a number of the discussions in this book show why this position seems so compelling to so many people.

For those readers who are already familiar with and influenced by bell hooks, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy have brought together a set of authors who will ratify your opinions. Of course, bell hooks herself deserves to be read and read carefully. But for those of you who are not yet familiar with her work, this volume will also give you a reason to go and read her.

Michael W. Apple

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Acknowledgments

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Finally, this project could not have been possible without the work of bell hooks whose writing and activism is a gift to humanity.

Yancy: To Lupe, my coeditor, I thank for asking me to collaborate in freedom to put this text together. We work well together—kindred spirits who refuse to settle for just average. I would like to thank bell hooks/Gloria Watkins for giving us so many gifts, so much to engage, and so much to take us higher and deeper. Heather Jarrow at Routledge and Michael Apple are thanked for immediately recognizing the importance of this work. Michael is especially to be thanked for his delightful demeanor toward two editors working under tight time constraints. The contributors are thanked for the time and effort that they put into their contributions. I appeal to the Yancy boys' sense of forgiveness that their dad took up so much of their summer. I love and owe you—Gabriel, Elijah, Joshua, and (the newly arrived) Samuel. As for Susan—"filled with life"—I thank you for your efforts at finding the energy to engage this text with such care and dedication.

Introduction

MARIA DEL GUADALUPE DAVIDSON AND GEORGE YANCY

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* [New York: Continuum, 2000], p. 88)

The above epigraph speaks to bell hooks's ethical stance, pedagogical vision, political sensibilities around the importance of transgression, philosophical anthropology informed by an antiessentialist framework, passion to help to create a world where multiple sites of oppression and dehumanization are challenged and overthrown, and belief in a collective movement toward spiritual and existential enrichment. Indeed, the above epigraph by Paulo Freire speaks to the young bell hooks within her *lived* context of challenging silences, of *becoming* within the facticity of *lived* social and familial spaces, and of *naming* as an act of empowerment.

Renaming, renarrating is not new to bell hooks or to Gloria Watkins. Part of this practice of naming is captured in a form of "back talk."¹ Back talk "was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring."² Yet, for hooks, it was a form of creating distance, a mode of achieving a perspective on what might otherwise remain unnamed and unspoken. At an early age, hooks knew of the importance of what Freire terms problem-posing education.³ She dared to speak and dared to speak back.

Back talk is not inherently a form of disrespect; it can function as a mode of self-assertion, a way of being agential, a way in which we are able to make ourselves known, recognized, and valued. Back talk is a mode of coming to voice, a way of "taking a stand" as when one resists. It is a species of fearless speech. Hence, for hooks, voice is a powerful vehicle in terms of which we *name* who and what we are. hooks writes, "Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo, I was punished."⁴ In the very midst of her parents' attempt to build a home where the father is symbolic of law and order, hooks was "relentlessly questioning, daring to challenge male authority, rebelling against the very patriarchal norm they [her mother and father] were trying so hard to institutionalize."⁵ In confronting male authority, hooks was problem-posing the historical sedimentation of patriarchy. "That which had existed objectively but had not been

perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed it was perceived at all) begins to ‘stand out,’ assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge,”⁶ according to Freire. hooks had begun to make patriarchy an object of critical reflection, and, as such, an object of her action and cognition.⁷

hooks was filled with alienation. She spoke—“back talked”—but was not heard. She writes, “I did not feel truly connected to these strange people, to these familial folks who could not only fail to grasp my worldview but who just simply did not want to hear it.”⁸ Silence and silenced, looking for a place called “home,” hooks’s daring speech-acts brought back parental efforts “to repress, contain, punish.”⁹ One can imagine the pain of being silenced.

While growing up, her mother, Rosa Bell Watkins, worked in the home while her father, Veodis Watkins, worked as a custodian for the postal service. In one among many wrenching moments from her memoir, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, hooks recounts (in her voice as a child) an instance where she disrupted her brother’s game of marbles and then was beaten by her father with wood from their screen door. Her mother, although horrified by the beating of her daughter, was powerless to intervene. Later that evening, after having been sent to bed for the night without anything to eat, Gloria (hooks) overheard her father telling her mother “that the girl had too much spirit, that she had to learn to mind, that that spirit had to be broken.”¹⁰

In her foreword to *Bone Black*, she observes that her story “is the story of girlhood rebellion, of [her] struggle to create self and identity distinct from yet inclusive of the world around [her].”¹¹ In spite of its pain, her narrative is a beautiful one and for hooks the marvel of the text “lies in the way it all comes together exposing and revealing the inner life of a girl inventing herself—creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of her true destiny—becoming a writer.”¹² Again, in *Bone Black*, hooks relates a number of instances in which someone or something attempts to limit her *creative space*, to prevent her from *becoming*. Indeed, there were extrafamilial forces designed to silence, to subdue the spirit. She and other black children were racialized by white society in ways that had the sole purpose of making them feel inferior, of making them internalize themselves as a problem. For example, hooks relates that she had to walk to school every day because they lived close enough to do so (noting that the bus going to their school would not pick the children up even if it was raining); furthermore, there were many other black children who had to wake up before the sun in order to attend school. Even at this young age the children knew that their treatment was skin-based. The reality of segregation in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, which was the place of her birth, reinforced a form of ontological difference, returning her black body (along with the bodies of other black children) to her (to them) as unfit, sullied.

Another example of racialization occurred with the introduction of color when hooks was a little girl in school. Children learn their colors by working with crayons.¹³ From her crayon box, she was introduced to the “flesh colored” crayon. At that point in her life, she lacked the language to articulate that the crayon box functioned as a site of racial symbolism, perhaps even as a mundane tool of oppression that reminded young nonwhite children that there is only one flesh that matters: peach-

colored flesh. Although she lacked the language to give voice to her resistance at that early age, she nevertheless was able to find a *creative space* to resist this. She, like all children, knew that “flesh colored” crayons were the worst for creating pictures. She also knew that this so-called “flesh...[had] no relationship to our skin, for we are brown and brown and brown like all good things.”¹⁴ Through examples such as these, hooks shows that in spite of all attempts to box one in, there are moments of opposition and *creative spaces* to be found, if not created.

Not to question, not to interrogate, not to problem-pose, not to articulate the layers of imaginative wondering and wandering can kill the spirit. But as Freire reminds us, human existence cannot be silent. To exist is “to stand out,” is to pose one’s existence as an object of critical reflection. hooks had to risk the possibility of going mad, which she was told would happen to her if she continued “all this crazy talk.”¹⁵ As hooks writes, “Safety and sanity were to be sacrificed if I was to experience defiant speech.”¹⁶ hooks found a place to call home, so to speak, within the space of theorizing; there she could make “sense out of what was happening.”¹⁷ One might argue that there she found a place of *ecstasy*, a place that enabled a critical metaperspective on her situation. As Peter L. Berger notes, “In other words, ‘ecstasy’ transforms one’s awareness of society in such a way that *givenness* becomes *possibility*.”¹⁸ hooks learned “that theory could be a healing place.”¹⁹ Theory helped her to make sense of “the personal history and experiences informing [her] parents’ behavior.”²⁰ What is particularly profound is how hooks links theory with her existential sense of desperation and intensity of pain. She speaks of a radically different understanding of theory or a different calling that theory might serve. In other words, theory is not reduced to a form of objective “seeing” where one is fixed in the mode of “spectator.” Theory does not dwell in the ethereal realm of abstraction, a space where only a few “privileged” and “elite” get to ruminate within exclusive academic spaces about what “really” matters. Rather, hooks sees “the production of theory as a social practice that can be liberatory.”²¹

hooks’s deployment of theory did not simply imaginatively comport her to brave new worlds, but enabled her *to act*, to act bravely; her “lived experience of theorizing [was] fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery.”²² As such, there was “no gap between theory and practice.”²³ Her self-recovery—through the deployment of theory toward that end—was an act. Even as theory was a site of security, hooks continued to back talk. Not only through the deployment of theory was she problem-posing, developing a critical consciousness, but back talking/talking back also enabled a “movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.”²⁴ Through the deployment of her voice, her back talking speech-acts, hooks transgressed the role of passive observer; she was able to nurture a critical subjectivity.

Another vehicle for nurturing her sense of critical subjectivity and resistance was through the act of self-narration and self-ascription. *Becoming* “bell hooks” functioned as a form of rupture. The name *bell hooks* created a space of surrender; bell hooks was the symbolic antithesis of all that Gloria Watkins was supposed to be, “a sweet southern girl, quiet, obedient, pleasing.”²⁵ Hence, becoming bell hooks was a form of counternomination. A new narrative was needed as a way of revisioning the self, retelling the narrative possibilities of the self. hooks explains that

she adopted the name bell hooks, her professional and pen name, in honor of her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks, who was Native American by birth. Citing her grandmother, hooks relates that she “left her native community to marry my grandfather who ‘looked like a white man but was a nigga.’”²⁶ After hearing many stories about the native traditions of her maternal great-grandmother from her maternal grandmother (Sarah Oldham), hooks was impressed by the way that her great-grandmother was able to combine “her ways of living in the world with black traditions.”²⁷ Yet, in addition to paying tribute to her ancestors, hooks’s adoption of a pen name is also a creative response to events in her personal life.

Bell Blair Hooks is described as “a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back.”²⁸ In adopting the name of her great-grandmother, hooks internalized the spirit of this woman who refused to be silent. Her renaming was itself “a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.”²⁹ As she notes, “Choosing this name as a pseudonym was a rebellious gesture.”³⁰ As a serious process, the act of naming phenomena shapes perception, and hooks came to see her sense of purpose with greater clarity through an act of reconstituted identity. “A primacy is given to naming,” according to hooks, “as a gesture that deeply shapes and influences the social construction of a self.”³¹ Adopting the name *bell hooks* was not a form of escapism. It was an act of resistance against stifling modes of being. One might also argue that the act of self-ascription was a form of love; not only self-love, but an act of love that reached across generations to pay homage to her great-grandmother. hooks reached back into the past and creatively aligned her identity with that of Bell Blair Hooks, which was a profoundly Womanist gesture that resulted in the creation of an ally (etymologically, “to bind to”). Incorporating that identity, reinventing that identity, “playing” with that identity, creating an ally, Gloria Watkins managed to keep alive her great-grandmother. “When the name bell hooks is called, the spirit of my great-grandmother rises.”³²

The practice of naming and claiming is not about “allowing” those voices to be heard that have been historically relegated to the margins. Naming is the active process of breaking through forms of imposed silence. Naming the world, naming reality, is a mode of problem-posing, a way of calling attention to the social world and its appearance of fixity. Naming might be understood as a form of demasking, unveiling modes of bad faith and ideological obfuscation. Naming, then, is both about renaming the self and renaming reality. Renaming the self and renaming reality are coconstitutive, a hermeneutics of transformation that presupposes and valorizes the unity between theory and practice.

hooks is critical of those discourses that reduce black women to their experiences; discourses that presume that black women are incapable of *naming* their own experiences. The assumption is that black women and other women of color are incapable of critically engaging their lived situations through the deployment of theory and critical discourse. On this score, black women provide experiences that are later critically interpreted by those bodies, typically white, that are said to be capable of “really” doing theory. hooks is critical of the stereotype that “the ‘real’ black woman is always the one who speaks from the gut, who righteously praises

the concrete over the abstract, the material over the theoretical.³³ For hooks, pain, suffering, and joy inform her use of theory. Yet, theory is not to be *reduced* to the emotive, even as the desire for theory might be linked to pain and suffering. As hooks writes:

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.³⁴

For hooks, the very way in which she wielded theory was itself an act of agency. She could have formed a private “autoerotic” relationship to theory, one where the pleasures of contemplation meant the exclusion of others, a form of practicing theory that involved a form of recoil from the quotidian, from engaging with others and passionately and critically engaging with others. However, hooks writes,³⁵ “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask it to do so and direct our theorizing toward this end.” Hence, hooks deliberately engages theory for self-flourishing. In addition, the flourishing of others is a constitutive part of her drive to transgress those spaces, academic and otherwise, that fail to encourage self-actualization and self-flourishing for others or those spaces that actually militate against such flourishing.

hooks critiques the academy as a site where it is not important that one’s work engages in transformation of the status quo or that encourages self-actualization; it is enough that one’s work is praised by one’s colleagues, those other experts and academicians who are also endowed with exclusive epistemic access to “truly” scholarly work. hooks, however, transgresses the flat discursive practices of academia. She is “perpetually concerned with what kinds of codes, apart from interest, convey to a group of people the notion that a particular book isn’t for them.”³⁶ As such, she is concerned with the intellectual and spiritual edification of others, transgressing and disrupting those codes that exclude others as “intellectually incapable” and “mediocre.” Even in her written work, hooks enacts practices of freedom, transgressing those academic codes that equate nonscholarly work with the deployment of a personal voice, an autobiographical voice, a voice “too” conscious of its raced, gendered, classed, able-bodied standpoint. This move does not reinscribe essentialism. The so-called privileged position from nowhere is a chimera. The selves that we fashion are “selves that emerge from the meeting of diverse epistemologies, habits of being, concrete class locations, and radical political commitments.”³⁷

hooks values the pregnancy of speech. She values speaking across the socially constructed, though hegemonic boundaries stipulated by academic norms governing the speaking and writing self. The point here is not that hooks is incapable of a more traditional academic discourse;³⁸ rather, she is against those academic and editorial practices “which would have all our articles [books] sound alike.”³⁹ Of course, at a deeper level, hooks’s concerns extend beyond the academy. Hence, her vision is not tethered to those academic spaces where one’s academic talents are stroked, where one’s ego is nurtured by a small group of professionals. Even as

she is aware of the importance of academic kudos, for she does “straddle academic and non-academic worlds,”⁴⁰ her vision is to speak in and to multiple voices. She speaks with the sort of polyvocality and multivocality that maximizes access to variegated readers/listeners.⁴¹ Hence, hooks sees her writing decisions as grounded in political activism. She writes, “I have written elsewhere, and shared in numerous public talks and conversations, that my decisions about writing style, about how not using conventional academic formats [such as not using footnotes], are political decisions motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach as many readers as possible in as many different locations.”⁴² Again, to make such choices is to transgress those academic social contracts that stifle creativity, fearless speech, and honest self-disclosure. This is a rare stand to take—a *bold way of talking back*—in the face of conservative academics who discount extra-academic engagement as ersatz, as a breach of academic “purity.” For example, on this score, when one’s work speaks to prisoners, it is assumed a priori that the work must be shoddy. The fact of the matter is that hooks’s work dares to reach beyond the norms of academic inbreeding. Her work is engaged and traverses multiple social locations and political concerns. She shares, “Recently, I have received a spate of letters from incarcerated black men who read my work and wanted to share that they are working to unlearn sexism. In one letter, the writer affectionately boasted that he has made my name a ‘household word around that prison.’”⁴³

hooks is an insurgent intellectual who knows the value of peer recognition, but whose readership clearly extends beyond the academy. She is aware of how “the forces of social control within the academy”⁴⁴ can function as a location of reinscribing the status quo. Not only is she cognizant of the social controls that can lead to practices of self-censorship, but she is also aware of the racist double standards that exist. She writes, “White academics, some of whom had published very little, demanded proof of my continued intention of writing. Something like the anti-bellum slave auction, when the new master demanded proof of the slave women’s fertility.”⁴⁵ Raised to believe that “a prophet is never received in his own home,” hooks is thankful “because when the academy was not recognizing the value and legitimacy of [her] work, many non-academic folks—Black, White, Asian—were writing to [her], telling [her] how much they valued and appreciated [her] work, which both surprised and sustained [her].”⁴⁶

While her work speaks to the pain and suffering of all groups, her work is fundamentally inspired by her love of and for black people. She speaks in a voice and writes in a prose that is unabashedly black. Even though her message is for all people, she is concerned with the existential and spiritual welfare of black people; it is a unique, indigenous, and rooted concern. She encourages black people to find the courage to resist the totalizing forces of gender discrimination, racism, and classism.

hooks links her desire to speak at multiple sites where learning and critical engagement take place to her feminist thinking and practice. She notes, “When asked to talk in university settings, I search out other settings or respond to those who search me out so that I can give the riches of feminist thinking to anyone.”⁴⁷ Implicit here is the understanding that academia—which is still a predominant space where white men bond—is not *the* single site of epistemic and dialogical en-

gement. The academy has no monopoly on where the critical exchange of ideas can and might occur. On this score, barbershops, street corners, and kitchens are sites where elenchus is alive and animated, sites that offer the potential for mutual transformation, even healing. This is also in keeping with hooks's versatility to engage different groups, some might be college-educated and others may not. She writes, "At a black-owned restaurant in the South, for instance, I sat for hours with a diverse group of black women and men from various class backgrounds discussing issues of race, gender and class."⁴⁸ hooks mentions the fact that one black woman came up to her after the discussion thanking her for the fact that the dialogue allowed her to give voice—in her black vernacular speech practices—to various feelings and ideas that she had allowed to remain silent. hooks writes, "Holding my hands, standing body to body, eye to eye, she allowed me to share emphatically the warmth of that healing. She wanted me to bear witness, to hear again both the naming of her pain and the power that emerged when she felt the hurt go away."⁴⁹ The point here is that restaurants can function as sites of profound moments of healing and wholeness. For hooks, it is not the physical site so much as it is the spirited dialogue, the honesty of intersubjective sharing of pain, suffering, and joy that is important. Engaged dialogue is a mobile site that is concretized and secured by those who will commit to transgress together, to share ideas and feelings together, to challenge the status quo together, and to engage in the practice of freedom together. Spirited by this sense of collective sharing and collective dialogue, a space not of apotheosis, but of mutual respect, a textual site where interlocutors share in practices of freedom, *Critical Perspective on bell hooks* was conceived.

To some, hooks's work might be viewed as a blueprint to *transgress* an education system that is bent on destroying those minds entrusted to its care. To others, hooks's work might appear as providing the necessary tools to *resist* the forces of racism, capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy. While these and many other meanings can be attributed to hooks's work, one phrase rarely used but perhaps most fitting is that of *creative spaces*. bell hooks's work recognizes the need to forge creative spaces. Creative spaces, of course, are not readily given, especially to members of marginalized groups. Instead, they have to be made, demanded, or won.

For hooks, such creative spaces are usually located on the margins of normalizing discourses. "Perhaps the most fascinating constructions of black subjectivity..." she writes "emerge from writers, cultural critics, and artists who are poised on the margins of various endeavors."⁵⁰ By engaging hooks's work, the contributors to *Critical Perspective on bell hooks* appreciate the importance of working from the margins. It is of utmost importance that like hooks we too name:

...marginality as a site of transformation...emphasizing that there is a "definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as [a] site of resistance as [a] location of radical openness and possibility."⁵¹

To that end, *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* is an edited book that engages the pedagogical, cultural, political, and social philosophy of bell hooks—Womanist, public intellectual, scholar, political gadfly, transgressive teacher, activist, and a black woman of wisdom and fortitude.

In her work *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, Joy James argues that the role of the public intellectual for black America is usually reserved for black men. Working counter to this, hooks is one of the few black women public intellectuals. Her work challenges dominant exemplars and most importantly the position of patriarchy as a *historical* transcendental norm. Her challenge to various hegemonic practices—racism, classism, sexism, and capitalist forms of exploitation and commodification—has heavily influenced scholars in numerous areas of inquiry: cultural studies, feminist and womanist theory, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, film studies, and critical pedagogy. Due to hooks's multidisciplinary appeal, prominent scholars from a variety of disciplines (e.g., philosophy, English, social work, education, rhetoric and communication, and those whose work has significant cultural studies implications) were invited to engage in a collective effort to think critically, that is, appreciatively, about her ever expanding body of work.

Critical Perspectives on bell hooks is organized thematically under three rubrics: “Critical Pedagogy and Praxis,” “The Dynamics of Race and Gender,” and “Spirituality and Love.” The following is a synopsis of each chapter.

Critical Pedagogy and Praxis

Nathalia Jaramillo and Peter McLaren open their chapter through the lens of Frida Kahlo's artistic work. Whether through the pen or the paintbrush, their point is to show that hooks is a major pedagogical force in terms of producing texts that are accessible to people from various backgrounds. Jaramillo and McLaren laud hooks's critical endeavor to shift the focus of critical pedagogy away from a male dominated perspective by insisting on the centrality of women's voices. In doing so, they argue that hooks makes clear that the practice of critical pedagogy “is ultimately a *dialectical* practice prompted by the concrete realities that inform the specificity of human experience.” And while they also laud her views regarding the importance of creating spaces for all to be free from the shackles of the capitalist marketplace, they find hooks's efforts at explaining just what accounts for objective class location to be wanting. They also “recognize the need for a dialectics of change to be set in motion between the ‘self’ and the productive relations of capitalist society.”

George Yancy engages hooks's critical pedagogy in terms of its importance for speaking to and challenging whiteness. He makes an important link between the banking system of education and how this approach is complicit with sustaining and creating an ethos around leaving whiteness unexamined. The banking system reinforces the white student as passive and normative, further concealing whiteness as privilege. Yancy argues that white students must come to see themselves as incomplete through an engaged pedagogy that encourages acts of problem-posing that enable students to *name* whiteness and make whiteness an object of critical reflection.

Cindy LaCom and Susan Hadley bring two very important theoretical lenses—disability studies and music therapy respectively—to bear upon hooks's work in the area of critical pedagogy. LaCom and Hadley share hooks's view that the classroom

is a critical space for deconstructing various hegemonic practices. Deploying personal narrative, a critical approach used by hooks, they explore the classroom as an important site for engaging in practices of freedom. In stream with hooks, both challenge the view that embodiment (and even the arrangement of physical space) is inconsequential to our epistemic practices. Place and embodiment become important sites of critical embarkation not only for recognizing how certain bodies get marked (and how others are deemed “normative” and unmarked), but also for recognizing ways in which self-reflection on one’s own often unexamined embodied standpoint within the context of classrooms can undo practices of unfreedom within and beyond the classroom, “And that can truly be transformative.”

Tim Davidson and Jeanette R. Davidson employ a thoroughly engaging deconstruction of the role of whiteness in the academy. Their chapter argues that hooks’s direct confrontation and unmasking of whiteness in the academy through language that identifies the “the functional structure of racism” creates a space for revolutionary transformation to occur. Their chapter engages hooks’s contention that racism, particularly in terms of its manifestation in the academy, is not to be reduced to a set of beliefs or attitudes, but is systemic and institutional. They explore important themes such as personal narrative, feminism, postmodernism, the problematic servant-served construct, decolonization, and more, as these relate to hooks’s work vis-à-vis exploring and challenging whiteness qua white supremacy within the academy.

Gretchen Givens Generett discusses the way in which bell hooks’s critical pedagogy impacted her work as an educator. Through the deployment of a personal narrative voice, she provides *lived* experiences of being encouraged, while at Spelman College, to claim her space and her voice. In short, Generett has come to appreciate how the Spelman College experience was itself a site of transgression and embodied practices of freedom. She also points to how important hooks’s work was for her as a black woman teacher, particularly in terms of claiming self-empowerment and agency. Generett is also cognizant of how easy it is not to engage pedagogical spaces critically. “For students and teacher educators alike, self-actualization within an educational community is frightening.” She argues that teacher educators must critically apply hooks’s insights to their lives in and outside the classroom, creating sites that enable and sustain creative efforts. Indeed, for Generett, all students need an engaged pedagogy where theory meets practice.

Carme Manuel’s chapter explores how hooks’s larger political views are woven into her children’s books. hooks has written about the internalization of blackness (by blacks) as that which is to be feared, that which is ugly, and as a signifier of inferiority and invisibility. Hence, hooks’s work situates black life within the context of an antiracist America. Unlike many theorists, hooks has focused her work on the most fragile among us—children. This demonstrates the polyvocality of her work. Focusing on hooks’s children’s books *Happy to be Nappy*, *The Skin I’m In*, *Be Boy Buzz*, and *Homemade Love*, Manuel’s important chapter looks at the way that hooks’s books for children attempt to resist the negative images of blackness that daily assault the black psyche, by instilling the positive values of self-love, familial love, and communal love.

The Dynamics of Race and Gender

Donna-Dale Marcano's chapter seeks to argue that the work of hooks "should be considered a phenomenology of a black feminist consciousness." Hence, Marcano opens up new spaces for engaging hooks's critical corpus. Marcano's chapter is itself an enactment of a phenomenology of black feminist consciousness, one that is in search of itself, critical of itself, and understanding of itself. Through the deployment of a first-person voice, one consistent with an effort to capture various complex *lived* experiences, Marcano's chapter is concerned with how black women find a voice (especially in spaces like philosophy, which tend to be white and male dominated). She realizes that engaging a black feminist phenomenology is different from standard and institutionalized phenomenology. The former takes seriously not just embodiment, but black women's situated facticity vis-à-vis the serious ways that sexism and racism in philosophy shape the consciousness of black women.

Maria del Guadalupe Davidson argues that we can gain insight into hooks's understanding of radical black subjectivity through her notion of *the commodification of otherness*. Whereas the commodification of otherness seeks to nullify one's being, Davidson shows how hooks's radical black subjectivity creates a space where multiple black subjectivities may occur, a position that highlights hooks's philosophical commitment to an antiessentialist position vis-à-vis questions of black identity and subjectivity.

Clevis Headley's chapter critically observes that black theorists tend to reject postmodernism as a viable and valuable discourse in the struggle for black liberation. Headley argues that hooks, though she understands the problems inherent in postmodernism, is one of the few black theorists who see the importance of engaging the postmodern project, especially its rejection of essentialism. In Headley's estimation, hooks correctly sees postmodernism's rejection of essentialist norms as a potentially powerful tool in the resistance to the totalizing structures of race, class, and gender. What makes Headley's chapter particularly groundbreaking is its engagement with hooks's work in relationship to postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction. And while Headley engages hooks's work within the context of an antiessentialism, he shows that her work nevertheless speaks truth to power through the discourse and importance of positionality.

Arnold Farr philosophically engages the problem of race. Farr insightfully points out how race is often treated as unreal and yet its reality gets expressed existentially and within the context of antiracism. Farr, however, does not enter into the debate around the reality of race. Rather, he explores hooks's important work regarding what can be done with race to overcome racism. Taking this route, Farr engages themes such as essentialism and the social construction of race, the deconstruction of race and postmodern blackness, and the reconstruction of race and revolutionary blackness. Farr shows that while hooks is critical of an essentialist reading of blackness, one that is counterhegemonic, this does not belie a discourse embedded in loving blackness, an act which is indeed revolutionary. Farr situates hooks's discourse within a context of white supremacy that "constructs social systems that are based on a hatred of blackness. Indeed, blacks are encouraged to hate themselves." Within a larger context, Farr sees liberal "antiracism" as a site that encourages us to

pretend that racial identity does not exist. Such discourse is problematic, however, within the larger context where loving blackness is existentially, aesthetically, and politically invaluable.

Spirituality and Love

Kathy Glass traces hooks's treatment of love in *Salvation*, *All About Love*, and *Communion*, three books which effectively marry theory with a cogent analysis of America's ills. Glass historically situates hooks in the footsteps of towering figures like Martin L. King, Jr., James Baldwin, and June Jordan. She argues that hooks offers love as a powerful location from which to combat and transform the unjust material conditions inherent in the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" operating in America. Glass's chapter is especially important because it moves through hooks's conception of love vis-à-vis prominent black literary figures. First, she defines and explores the parameters of hooks's conception of love. Second, she interrogates hooks's theory of love by analyzing Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In the final section of her chapter, Glass briefly reflects on the risks of loving, as seen in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Glass makes it clear that grounding hooks's theory in literary analysis will help to elucidate love's political implications and its capacity to facilitate meaningful structural change.

Marilyn Edelstein explores the work of hooks and Julia Kristeva around the theme of love within our postmodern moment. Edelstein is aware of how the idea of "love" has been, particularly in most modern Western thought, so entangled in conceptions of romance that relatively few postmodern or feminist thinkers have engaged the specifically *ethical* (or *political*) possibilities inherent in nonsexual love for the other; that is, in terms of friendships, love of community, love of one's neighbors. While fully cognizant of the antifoundational sentiments embedded in postmodern thought, Edelstein argues that love becomes both an ethical and a political "foundation," and also a source of hope, in the work of bell hooks and Julia Kristeva—despite the fact that both are also critical of certain forms of postmodernism. She sees hooks and Kristeva as postmodern feminists. Edelstein, like Headley, is careful to explore just how she understands postmodernism. Both hooks and Kristeva, according to Edelstein, see love as crucial for creating political alliances as well as life-affirming identities and human communities.

Nancy E. Nienhuis's chapter begins with an analysis of community and how hooks addresses the "ambiguity" and "alienation" found in the structure of various communities and the need to formulate "communities of resistance." Nienhuis then goes on to discuss hooks's "ethic of compassion" which she argues has been a central construct in much of hooks's work. Nienhuis argues that alienation promotes trepidation and distrust, arguing that systems of power and oppression undermine solidarity. She argues that hooks's analysis of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy reveals ways in which we are disengaged from each other. She holds that hooks is aware that movement toward the other is not simply an emotional response to another but a radical political act. It is the story of the Good Samaritan that focuses

on the agency of the subject, a narrative that is congruent with hooks's conceptualization of love as a centrifugal force. Framing her chapter within the context of a liberating theology, Nienhuis argues that a feminist liberation theology of the neighbor recognizes that one's neighbors are both those living under the same roof and those far away.

Susana Vega-González examines bell hooks's interest in both love and spirituality in the black community. Vega-González is most interested in the way in which hooks's love ethic works to combat the forces of "lovelessness" found in so much of the black community. Vega-González does not argue that the black community is somehow intrinsically plagued by lovelessness, but situates this lovelessness within the context of capitalism and patriarchy as major causes of the absence of love, as hooks exposes in her work. For Vega-González, hooks's trenchant indictment of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and capitalism is precisely associated with a lack of love. However, this does not render completely impotent the power of agency. According to Vega-González, for hooks, love is an act of will, an action, a choice, that is intrinsically associated with the idea of agency. Apart from functioning as a means of self-empowerment, having the possibility of exerting agency conveys the exercise of freedom, which is another key element in the process of self-realization of a human being. Therefore, a love ethic fosters and leads to freedom, proving to be a powerful resource toward the liberation of broken, fettered spirits.

Notes

1. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 5.
2. hooks, *Ibid.*
3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 83.
4. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 83.
7. *Ibid.*
8. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 60.
9. *Ibid.*
10. bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 30.
11. *Ibid.*, xi.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
14. *Ibid.*, 8.
15. hooks, *Talking Back*, 7.
16. *Ibid.*
17. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 61.
18. Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), 136.
19. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 61.
20. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 66.
21. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 67.
22. *Ibid.*, 61.
23. *Ibid.*

24. hooks, *Talking Back*, 9.
25. Ibid., 162.
26. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 190.
27. Ibid.
28. hooks, *Talking Back*, 9.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 163.
31. Ibid., 166.
32. Ibid.
33. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 68.
34. Ibid., 59.
35. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 61.
36. hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 72.
37. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 19.
38. hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 73.
39. Ibid., 72.
40. Ibid., 73.
41. Ibid.
42. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 71.
43. Ibid., 71–72.
44. hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 73.
45. Ibid., 74.
46. Ibid., 75.
47. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 72–73.
48. Ibid., 73.
49. Ibid., 73–74.
50. hooks, *Yearning*, 19.
51. Ibid., 22.

I

Critical Pedagogy and Praxis

1

Borderlines

bell hooks and the Pedagogy of Revolutionary Change

NATHALIA E. JARAMILLO AND PETER MCLAREN

Prelude

My painting contains in it the message of pain. (Frida Kahlo, 1954, Personal diary. As cited in Peter Winn, *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*, third edition [Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000], p. 427)

For Frida Kahlo, the 21st century Mexican *adelita* (female warrior) of art pedagogy, the painted canvas reflected the domain of self-knowledge. Her *retratos*, self-portraits, and surrealist paintings dealt with the fracas of the spirit, that *horror vacui* between mind and body where one attempts to reconcile the perceived discrepancies between conscious thought and action. Frida's art reflected her spirit in many forms. Self-portraits claimed life after trauma, *naturaleza viva* (still life) dealt with the fear and inevitability of death,¹ and Mexicanidad was revealed in the conflictive narratives that characterized works such as *Self-Portrait of the Borderline*.² In the *Borderline*, the mythic quality of the sun (Logos) and the moon (Eros) cast their rays and shadow upon contested territories. Mexico rests under the moon, with cultural artifacts rooted in indigenous soil emerging from the postcolonial rubble of Tenochtitlan, the United States burns under the sun, with symbols of industrial "development" and human "progress" flogging its murky skies, and Frida, draped in a soft pink dress and sugar-laced gloves, stands at the border, with a cigarette in one hand and a Mexican flag in the other, demonstrating how the human psyche and spirit are never self-defined entities; they are firmly grounded in the vestiges of the past and the varnished possibilities of the future.

In her paintings, Kahlo personifies the borderlines of a warrior artist, where the "inviolable" man and "tender" woman are expressed as one. As a female being, Kahlo did not fit any particular mold or gendered schema. In many ways she was the *Chencha*³ of the art world, a female-male figure who traveled across the borders between passivity and aggression, innocence and sexuality, using her talent and trade as a healing force that could be shared by those daring enough to study her. The themes reflected in her art attended to the internal and external exigencies of social life, expressing "an emancipatory position with respect to redefining the nature of private and public realities."⁴ As Frida wrote, "since my themes have

always been my sensations, my states of mind, and the deep reactions that life has been causing inside me, I've frequently materialized all that into portraits of myself, which were the most sincere and real thing that I could do to express how I felt about myself and what was in front of me."⁵ In paintings like the *Borderline* we can see how the private and public sphere come together as Frida negotiates the stark contradictions of living in a postcolonial, nascent capitalist nation. She exposed the politics of domination between *mexicanidad* and industrial development, national sovereignty and imperialist power, and forging a cultural identity against colonization. Often unable to move freely in the world because of her punctured spine or temperamental womb, Frida did not allow the agony of internal suffering to strip her of agency. *Con coraje* Frida confronted the pain of lived experience through the cultural symbolism and surrealist portraits composed on the painted canvas.

We invoke *Frieducha* to begin this chapter on bell hooks because in many ways, hooks's expansive writings can be interpreted as a sequence of Kahlo paintings. Every text, essay, or critical exposé is an expression of hooks's inner and outer self and of the existential realities that give shape to her thinking in and about the wider social setting. hooks joins the ranks of *adelita* artists, women who with the power of the pen or the paintbrush have become major pedagogical forces in the formally schooled and the unschooled, producing "texts" accessible to people from various backgrounds and from equally diverse life trajectories. Like Kahlo, hooks does not deny the centrality of personal experience as an objective place from which to interpret the social world. hooks also recognizes that personal experience is grounded in concrete relations that extend well beyond an individual's stream of consciousness. For hooks, every reflection, analysis, personal story, or anecdote encompasses broader relations of racial, class, and sexual exploitation; she denaturalizes the mythic status of oppression and demonstrates the ways in which oppression slices open corporeal wounds within and across communities. Like a Frida Kahlo self-portrait, hooks carries her politics inside her personal life; her writings are at once subjective and transhistorical, they reach across the divide of time to places both intensely familiar and unvisited.

bell hooks and Critical Pedagogy

Over the years, we have been greatly impacted by hooks and her contribution to the field of critical pedagogy. Specifically, hooks's engagement with the work of the late Paulo Freire brought a distinctly feminist voice and perspective to the critical pedagogical tradition. On the central themes of oppression, exploitation, literacy, *conscientização*, and pedagogies of liberation and freedom, hooks has been unrelenting in her call for a distinctly feminist methodology that addresses the needs of women (feminist theory). Her writings have cautioned a reexamination of the masculinist macropolitics embedded in oppressive social structures (and concomitant theories of liberation). Moreover, her insistence on naming women and men as objects of exploitative relations and subjects of transformation has called attention to the unique consequence of imperialist-capitalist-patriarchal social relations visited upon the sexes within U.S. society. hooks helps make visible that which criticalists

often look past: the specificity of women's oppression within a broader context of imperialism, or what hooks more adequately refers to as the "imperialism of patriarchy."⁶ Maria Mies echoes these sentiments when she writes of the "hidden woman syndrome" in the critical tradition as the "virtual exclusion of women, of their lives, work and struggles from the bulk of research" which "can be adequately epitomized in Bertolt Brecht's phrase: 'One does not see those who are in the dark.'"⁷ The important critique that these feminists raise does not elude the commitment that many have made in speaking and organizing against imperialism and patriarchy in social movements worldwide. But hooks and Mies do raise a broader issue which brings attention to the subversive quality of patriarchal social relations within critical theory and practice that, on the one hand, makes speaking about women's struggles secondary to more pressing "needs" (i.e., class struggle) and that on the other, does not permit a critical or reflective stance on addressing the perpetual silence about the convergence of sexism in pedagogies of social transformation.

hooks's writings remind us that critical pedagogy is ultimately a *dialectical* practice prompted by the concrete realities that inform the specificity of human experience. Bringing women into focus and the social relations that condition patriarchal cultures and subcultures within oppressed communities, stretches the dialectic to include the more intimate effects of exploitation on identity and knowledge formations. This in turn expands our understanding of praxis to be more "critical," "reflective," and committed to pursuing equity across ethnicity, race, and gender relations. Importantly, hooks avoids what she refers to as the "separatist ideology" of some feminist critique that intensifies existing antagonisms between the sexes.⁸ Although hooks is unwaveringly critical of patriarchal violence and oppression against women, her writings do not exclude an analysis and understanding of "man's" position in the overwhelmingly dehumanizing world order we know as capitalism. The reader of hooks's texts does not need to choose sides between "woman" or "man" in order to comprehend her pedagogical and philosophical contributions; the reader does, however, need to consider the inter- and intrasubjective formation of racial and gendered identities within complex community and social relations.

hooks's kinetic and protean writings invite dialogue and debate and although we depart philosophically and praxiologically from various articulations within hooks's broad *oeuvre*, we do not underestimate the importance of her scholarship in the field. It is in this spirit that we engage the writings of bell hooks, as a way to extend and situate her important work in an era that we unhesitatingly call Empire, or what others have shamelessly referred to as the "ownership society."⁹ We begin by revisiting hooks's writings on the oft-cited social tripartite—race, class, and gender—and examining how these relations form the basis of what hooks refers to as "feminist praxis."

Imperialism Rushes In: Class Exploitation, Patriarchal Power, and Racism

In her earliest work, *Ain't I a Woman?*, hooks begins a decades-long analysis of the relationship between imperialism, patriarchy, and sexism. Writing of the exploitation of black women and men in the antebellum South, where slavery, racism, and

sexism worked symbiotically to create an overarching system of institutionalized domination and oppression, hooks calls attention to the sexual division of labor within slave culture, noting how both whites and blacks engaged in sexual politics that systematically devalued black women. As hooks writes:

The area that most clearly reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault.¹⁰

hooks's assessment of how black men and women embodied the effects of "patriarchal power" in slavery draws our attention to the internal and external relations of subjective identity formation within an evolving capitalist social order, where men and women's relation to one another is not immune from productive capitalist forces. Relations of domination, exploitation, and alienation germane to the capitalist order permeate all aspects of social life, including the intimate spaces of the home. In this way, hooks's analysis opens the space for a critical interrogation of domination, exploitation, and oppression within class fractions and across gender relations. Thus, each subject of oppression is simultaneously unique and similar to another; unique in that the social location of "man" and "woman" reflects his or her relation to the dominant sociopolitical and economic order and similar in that neither sex can approach humanization under a totalizing patriarchal social order.

On the concept of humanization, hooks follows Freire's dialectic of the oppressor/ oppressed¹¹ and applies it to the patriarchal culture within black communities. In hooks's evaluation, the master-slave dialectic is exposed in the domestic sphere, where men and women mediate their unequal power relations within the larger racist-capitalist group politic; men with a penchant for the white-male-capitalist power denied to them in the workplace attempt to recuperate a sense of "manhood" in the home. For hooks, "patriarchal power" is not "just the privilege of upper and middle class white men, but the privilege of all men in our society regardless of their class or race."¹² hooks does not vilify or demonize "man" as the primary source of exploitation and domination in the social milieu; rather, she understands black men's patriarchal power as symptomatic of the macropolitics of race and class within the totality of capitalist social relations. On this point, hooks is worth quoting at length. She writes:

...to be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature, as it is to be a victim. Patriarchy forces fathers to act as monsters, encourages husbands and lovers to be rapists in disguise; it teaches our blood brothers to feel ashamed that they care for us, and denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives...patriarchy has become merely a sub-heading under the dominant system of imperialist capitalism, as patriarchs men do not serve their families and communities but serve the interests of the State.¹³

The oppressed/oppressor relationship runs through the body of hooks's work and becomes one of the most pressing concerns in her scholarship. She resumes an

analysis of “patriarchal power” in *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, where she conceives of power as conditioned by existing social hierarchies, or what she refers to as “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.”¹⁴ Within this social paradigm, power is distributed unevenly and indelibly: men have power, women are powerless; whites are powerful and nonwhite peoples are powerless; rich are powerful and poor are powerless. To some extent, these “dualisms” form the foundational stratum of hooks’s evolving “feminist theory.” From there, hooks rejects the “ideology of liberal individualism” in feminist theory and sets forward a position that underscores the “markings of race and class privilege” in sexist oppression.¹⁵ hooks may caution against a feminist theory that seeks only to end sexist exploitation but her position differs in important ways from liberal/progressive tendencies. Rather than adjudicating a position that gives “primary” or “central” importance to the elimination of sexism as a categorically distinct and self-contained set of practices (conceivably an antagonism resolved through legal or political “equal rights” measures), hooks challenges sexist oppression as a “crucial step in the struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression.”¹⁶ In other words, she views racism, class exploitation, and sexism as mutually constitutive but she does not presuppose that the elimination of any one “ism” can resolve the other contradictions.

hooks’s feminist theory is not anti-male, but it does oppose patriarchy. Her theory is not against whites, but it is anti-racist. For hooks, sexism is of central concern, not because it is the arbiter of all other “oppressions,” but because “it is the practice of domination most people experience, whether their role be that of discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited.”¹⁷ hooks further contends that sexist oppression must be eradicated because it “directly shapes and determines relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces, in that most intimate context—home—and in that most intimate sphere of relations—family.”¹⁸ Opposing patriarchy is both personal and political for hooks (as the well-versed feminist slogan goes, “the personal is political”). Here, we see how her evolving feminist theory and praxis is grounded in the familiar social spaces of family and community. As hooks recounts:

...even though family relations may be, and most often are, informed by acceptance of a politic of domination, they are simultaneously relations of care and connection. It is this convergence of two contradictory impulses—the urge to promote growth and the urge to inhibit growth—that provides a practical setting for feminist critique, resistance and transformation.¹⁹

hooks reminds us that a feminist praxis cannot stand in isolation from what takes place outside institutional settings; it is fundamentally and inextricably linked to life histories and experiences that give rise to human subjectivities and social relationships. The task then, in feminist praxis, is to reverse the standardized postulates of truth that assume a subject-neutral stance to revolutionary politics and pedagogy. As an active form of inquiry, feminist praxis makes it necessary to bring the repressed and socially “invisible” aspects of female experience into the “full daylight” of analysis.²⁰ As Mies asserts, “women, as objects of oppression are forced out of self-preservation to know the motives of their oppressors.” This “inner view of the oppressed,” is captured by a critical examination of the copresence of all the social,

political, and economic elements internal to women's existence, and of the relations of dominance and subordination that obtain between women and broader social relations.²¹ It is on this point that hooks begins to carve out "feminist praxis."

Toward a Feminist Praxis

Understanding a woman's experience in the private spaces of family and community is not new to feminist theory (in neither the "now" nor the "back then" of hooks's writing). Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, and radical feminists have made significant contributions to social movements and political theory in their insistence on analyzing women's domestic work as a source from which to articulate struggles for liberation. And Chicana, queer, *indigena*, and women from the global south have elaborated on the intimate spaces of identity formation, as patriarchal dimensions of religious-political-colonial-historical relations converge in communities. Feminist theory has countless instantiations. But perhaps what distinguishes hooks's writing the most is her discussion of feminism as a form of praxis—against sexism and against encompassing systems of oppression—that calls for a shift in the private and public domains of social life. It is in this fundamental sense that the power of hooks's feminist theory and praxis reveals itself. As she writes:

It is that political movement which most radically addresses the person—the personal—citing the need for transformation of self, of relationships, so we might be better able to act in a revolutionary manner, challenging and resisting domination, transforming the world outside the self. Strategically, feminist movement should be a central component of all other liberation struggles because it challenges each of us to alter our person, our personal engagement (either as victims of perpetrators or both) in a system of domination.²²

hooks's feminist praxis calls for a radical transformation of the self, a transcendence of the oppressed/oppressor relation that lies in the hierarchical strata of human consciousness. Similar to Freire's emphasis on the processes of codification and decodification that establish the pedagogical conditions for dialogue, critical consciousness, and meaningful practical activity, hooks advocates a feminist praxis that seeks self-recovery through "oppositional world view,"²³ literacy, and critical consciousness, and that in turn develops into a revolutionary feminist pedagogy in opposition to white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

Although hooks does not cite codification/decodification as part of her overall theory of praxis, we find it instructive to revisit Freire on this topic to foreground our understanding of "consciousness raising." For Freire, the processes of codification/decodification function as a way to apprehend reality as "interacting constituent elements" of the "whole." Only in understanding the fragmented aspects that characterize individual experience (i.e., as a gendered-ethnic-racialized body) in relation to the totality of social relations that characterize it does Freire suggest that one can "truly know that reality."²⁴ Freire maintains that knowledge of the totality must occur before one can separate and isolate its constituent elements as part of the total vision of concrete reality. In other words, Freire calls for the development

of a form of reasoning that can supersede the immediacy of “personal experience” to approach a critical awareness of the specificity of domination and oppression. Freire opines that:

This dialectical movement of thought is exemplified perfectly in the analysis of a concrete existential, “coded” situation. Its decoding requires moving from the part to the whole and then returning to the parts/ this in turn requires that the Subject recognize himself in the object (the coded concrete existential situation) and recognize the object as a situation in which he finds himself, together with other Subjects. If the decoding is well done, there is movement of flux and reflux from the abstract to the concrete which occurs in the analysis of a coded situation leads to the supersedence [sic] of the abstraction by the critical perception of the concrete, which has already ceased to be a dense, impenetrable reality.²⁵

In Freire’s terminology, codification represents the Subject’s day-to-day situation, or what we can refer to as one’s “practical consciousness.” It is a reflection upon situationality, the very condition of existence or what Freire referred to as “critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be ‘in a situation.’”²⁶ Historical awareness itself provides the ground for humankind to emerge and intervene in concrete everyday life, a movement that Freire calls *conscientização*. In Freire’s words, “conscientização is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence.”²⁷

In a similar vein, hooks establishes the link between “self-recovery as a process of education for critical consciousness” and thinking and writing, as an act of reclamation.²⁸ hooks poses the question:

...how do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?²⁹

For hooks, wholeness emerges from the margins of resistance, where traditional ways of teaching and learning that reinforce domination are eliminated.³⁰ hooks writes of the “margin” as the place where language can be developed to oppose dominant and hegemonic practice; where a culture of resistance can forge a “space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview”;³¹ and where Eros takes on new meaning, as love and lovingness create an “overall effort to be self-actualizing” in ways that can “invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination.”³² The margin, in hooks’s undertaking, creates the pedagogical conditions for an “oppositional discourse” where other ways of thinking, reading, writing, and “being” evolve in an attempt to contest relations of domination and exploitation. For hooks, the margin is a permanent refuge, derived from a personal, experiential reality, a “site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist.”³³

The “margin,” however, is never severed from axes of domination and exploitation.

We can identify with marginal sites of resistance, to announce and denounce the specificity of human oppression, but the main architecture of exploitation remains untouched. The margin may, to follow Victor Turner's terminology,³⁴ lead to "communitas," the unstructured communion of individuals who pursue an oppositional antistructure to the dominant social order, but whether individuals move outward to confront and pursue a transformation of the larger social drama of capitalism remains in question. The margin as "antistructure" is a liminal space where people come together to communicate and "unpack" the master's toolbox in their social transformation. In hooks's description, it is a metaphorical space on a plane of relative equality among people who are differentially positioned on a social plane of inequality (across race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth). Lacking a movement outward, a reintegration, or a radical transformation of the dominative social relations characteristic of capitalist society brings to question the ability of marginal sites of resistance to disorder the disorderly, subvert, or fully break from society. Will social actors return to the same unjust, unequal, and hierarchical world that they left? Can the "margin" establish the conditions for a revolutionary feminist praxis, a transcendence of sexist oppression in the personal and public realms of social life? Does the "margin" advance a revolutionary politics for the "self" but also for the collective "we"?

Returning to Freire, we can ascertain that the difference between hooks's "marginality and oppositional discourse" and the praxis of *conscientização* can be traced to a politics of location. Whereas Freire emphasizes the "totality" as a necessary place from which to articulate a pedagogical stance against oppression, hooks separates the "essence" of oppression as foregrounding sites of resistance. The difference is not semantic but instructional. In Freire's determination, a critical analysis of the "whole" of society highlights the contingency of lived experiences. In this process, the conditions are established for teacher and student alike to not only de-mythologize oppression, but to act against it, including relations of which they may be complicit or unaware. For hooks, starting from the particulars of oppression empowers social actors—whose experiences have been lost in totalizing narratives—to actualize their self-formation and to revisit the social world anew. Our point here is not to deny the importance of the liminal and transcendent spaces of social resistance that allow for a critical interrogation of the self and community as sensuous, unique, and spiritual beings,³⁵ or to privilege the structural entities or totalizing narratives that often mute the particulars of human experience, but to stress the movement between coming to voice and revolutionary action (we use this phrase in its broadest sense). On this point, we are reminded of an essay by the radical feminist, poet, and novelist Adrienne Rich, where she takes issue with the politics of location for a woman speaking against oppression. Rich is worth quoting at length:

Tribal loyalties aside, and even if nation-states are now just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interests, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. Begin though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest

in—the body. Here at least I know I exist, that living human individual whom the young Marx called “the first premise of all human history.” But it was not as a Marxist that I turned to this place, back from philosophy and literature and science and theology in which I had looked for myself in vain. It was as a radical feminist. The politics of pregnability and motherhood. The politics of orgasm. The politics of rape and incest, of abortion, birth control, forcible sterilization. Of prostitution and marital sex. Of what had been named sexual liberation. Of prescriptive heterosexuality. Of lesbian existence. And Marxist feminists were often pioneers in this work. But for many women I knew, the need to begin with the female body—our own—was understood not as applying a Marxist principle to women, but as locating the grounds from which to speak with authority as women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman. Begin, we said, with the material, with matter, *mma*, *madre*, *mutter*, *moeder*, *modder*, etc., etc. Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction.³⁶

Rich demonstrates with verve and clarity how the personal does not need to be suspended in the universal; that self-actualization can entrust social transformation; that capitalist social relations that appear greater than “I” are in fact, living and reproducing through “us” as human capital; that the body’s lining and lines are the texts that clairvoyants can read; that open eyes do not necessarily translate into seeing eyes; and that ordinary people are the organic curators of life. As Rich continues:

Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process, whether it calls itself Marxist or Third World or feminist or all three. Long before the nineteenth century, the empirical witch of the European Middle Ages, trusting her senses, practicing her tried remedies against the anti-material, anti-sensuous, anti-empirical dogmas of the Church. Dying for that, by the millions. “A female-led peasant rebellion”?—in any event, a rebellion against the idolatry of pure ideas, the belief that ideas have a life of their own and float along above the heads of ordinary people-women, the poor, the uninitiated.³⁷

Our position mirrors that of Rich, that the particulars or “essences” of human experience locate our subject position within a general social order. It is necessary, therefore, to move toward a pedagogical praxis that relates corporeality with broader practices that link the social with the political, economic, and cultural. Liminal pedagogical spaces thus emerge as sites of potentially transformative and liberatory educational practice that offer a means to move outside the immediacy of personal experience and into the realm of critical agency. The focus is for understanding not only how we have been affected by relations of domination and exploitation (through our bodies and our location in geographical space) but also how we can put in motion new forms of generating and enacting knowledge for the betterment of the self and the collective.

Revisiting Class

In her later work, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, “class” is the starting point for hooks’s assessment of the hierarchical relations that have emerged postslavery among communities in the United States. She writes of the misguided assessments often occasioned when social relations are examined from a purely “race” or “gender” lens. For hooks, neither racism nor sexism can be spoken about meaningfully or contested without a critical comprehension of class. She takes serious issue with the media and with the dominant ideology of U.S. capitalist society that consecrates the consumption of material goods as the primary expression of citizenship. In her writings on class, hooks advocates a strident critique of cultural models (e.g., media and film, which we see as the perpetual pedagogies of capital) that locate material consumption as the benchmark of identity formation and class location. hooks accomplishes a painstaking analysis of class hierarchies within black communities that have resulted in a “plantation economy” where wealth is accumulated in the hands of the few while extreme poverty is characteristic of the overwhelming majority. hooks writes:

The logic of racial uplift meant that black folks on the bottom of the class hierarchy were encouraged to regard with admiration and respect peers who were gaining class power. Class-based civil rights struggle...whose ultimate goal was to acquire more freedom for those black folks who already had a degree of class privilege however relative. Class based racial integration disrupted the racial solidarity that often held black folks together despite class difference. The privileged began to leave the underprivileged behind³⁸

While hooks’s writing on the logic of capitalist accumulation within black communities cannot strictly be classified as postmodernist, at times it focuses almost entirely on the cultural dimensions of racism and class—in other words, concentrating on the experiential and the subjective—without sufficient analysis at the level of capitalist production. While we find it important for a class analysis to focus on the ideological dimensions of consumption and how the state and the media sell the “notion of identification with the rich” to communities, too much emphasis on the discursive dimensions of class is problematic for a number of reasons. There is a tendency to reduce the experiential to roistering narratives at the level of culture, which often translates into an aboulia at the level of material life as the concept of agency remains acquiescent to the rule of capital and thus naturalizes existing social relations. The tendency in such class analyses—that views culture as an autonomous zone of the social that disconnects the material relation of culture from its labor relations—is fundamentally to ignore that capitalism is a “ruthless totalizing process which shapes our lives in every conceivable aspect” and that capitalism also subjects all “social life to the abstract requirements of the market, through the commodification of life in all its aspects,” thereby making a “mockery out” of all aspirations to “autonomy, freedom of choice and democratic self-government.”³⁹ In addition, as a result of the inflated culturalism of much contemporary social theory, political struggles have been limited to those over signs, signification, and the textual—something which Teresa Ebert attributes to

the “theory as play” motif epitomized in what she calls “ludic” theory.⁴⁰ For Ebert, ludic theory has served to undermine progressive political agendas, and the politics advocated by such intellectual “movements” has generally remained limited to the cultural and the discursive while cutting these off from the material relations underlying the cultural and the discursive.⁴¹ As a result, culturalist narratives have produced autonomist and reified conceptualizations of difference that “far from enabling those subjects most marginalized by” categories of difference have in effect reduced “difference to a question of knowledge/power relations” that can presumably be “dealt with (negotiated) on a discursive level without a fundamental change in the relations of production.”⁴² In other words, they naturalize the world for transnational capital.

By privileging cultural forms of oppression (i.e., the unequal distribution of “goods” within communities) and circumventing the material dimensions of difference, questions of difference are severed from analyses of class formation and capitalist social relations. In a proper historical materialist account, “culture” is not the “other” of class but rather constitutes part of a more comprehensive theorization of class relations in different contexts. Furthermore, we agree with E. San Juan who argues that it is “imperative” to “attend to the political economy of differences” in this era of globalized capital.⁴³

How then can we (re)conceptualize difference in relation to class formation and capitalist social relations? The first step, we would argue, is to ground our understanding of difference by drawing upon Marx’s materialist and historical formulations that enable us to apprehend “difference” in relation to social and economic organization rather than seeing “difference” as something that is primarily cultural or discursive. Because systems of difference almost always involve relations of domination and oppression, we must concern ourselves with the economies of relations of difference that exist in historically specific formations. Drawing on the Marxist concept of mediation enables us to unsettle the categorical, and often rigid, approaches to both class and difference, for it was Marx himself who warned against creating false dichotomies in the situation of our politics—that it was perilous to choose between consciousness and the world, subjectivity and social organization. In a similar vein, it is equally perilous to view “difference as a historical form of consciousness unconnected to class formation, development of capital and class politics.”⁴⁴ Bannerji points to the need to historicize difference in relation to the history and social organization of capital and class (inclusive of imperialist and colonialist legacies) and to acknowledge the changing configurations of difference and “otherness.” We need to highlight (1) the institutional and structural aspects of difference; (2) the meanings and connotations that are attached to categories of difference; (3) how differences are produced out of, and lived within, specific historical, social, and political formations; and (4) the production of difference in relation to the complexities, contradictions, and exploitative relations of capitalism. This presents a challenge to those theorizations that work to consolidate an “identitarian” understanding of difference that apprehends difference exclusively as a question of cultural or racial hegemony. In such approaches difference is rendered opaque in that it is often unhinged from its historical embeddedness in colonial/imperialist

relations and relations of production and valuation. Indeed, in culturalist narratives, the answer to oppression often amounts to creating greater discursive/textual space for the formerly excluded to have their voices heard (represented). Much of what is called difference politics, in this regard, is little more than a demand for inclusion into the cast of dominant representations—something that reinscribes a neoliberal pluralist stance rooted in the ideology of free-market capitalism.

Towards a Pedagogy of Revolution

hooks's analysis of the historical, political, and social conditions that have framed gender, class, and race relations in the United States is personal and comprehensive and her writings on the "intersection" between these seemingly autonomous social groupings have expanded our understanding of the concrete experiences of women and men who labor, live, love, struggle, resist, assimilate, and incorporate into U.S. society. hooks's personal anecdotes and analyses fall in line with certain trajectories of feminist writing that has sought to break from the normative traditions of social critique, not as a way to replace critical argument, but as a form of directing knowledge toward a collective understanding and practice. This, in turn, has significantly framed hooks's feminist praxis and engaged pedagogy—a pedagogy that seeks to situate "theory" and "practice" in the specific locations and agencies of social actors. For hooks, situated praxis occurs in the margins of dominant discourse and practice, establishing a space for transformations that seem possible against the overwhelming hegemonic and ideological bloc of capitalist consumption.

While we are in agreement that spaces need to be created for students, teachers, and the popular majorities to create and recreate their self-organization and to pursue freedom from the shackles of the capitalist marketplace, we also recognize the need for a dialectics of change to be set in motion between the "self" and the productive relations of capitalist society. In other words, we are talking about class struggle. Here, we are operating under the understanding that "class" is derived from an objective location within the capitalist social structure, where different social actors who cohere along race, gender, and sexuality are also organized in relation to their class position and function in capitalist society.⁴⁵ In stating this we need to include an important caveat that differentiates revolutionary critical pedagogy from those who invoke the well-worn race/class/gender triplet. This "triplet" approximates what the "philosophers might call a category mistake." On the surface the triplet may be convincing—some people are oppressed because of their race, some as a result of their gender, others because of their class—but this is grossly misleading for it is not that some individuals manifest certain characteristics or traits due to their lifestyle or habits that can be labeled as "class" which then results in their oppression; on the contrary, to be a member of the working class is simply to be a member of a group that is oppressed. In these instances, class is transformed from an economic and indeed, social category to an exclusively cultural or discursive one or one in which class merely signifies a subject position. In other words, we stress the explanatory primacy of class for analyzing the structural determinants of race, gender, and class oppression.⁴⁶

To reduce identity solely to the experience that people have of their race, class, and gender location is to fail to acknowledge the objective structures of inequality produced by specific historical forces (such as capitalist production relations) that mediate the subjective understandings of both individuals and groups. Most social relations constitutive of difference are considerably shaped by the relations of production and that there exists a racialized and gendered division of labor whose severity and function vary depending upon where one is located in the capitalist global economy is a commonplace assumption within various schools of Marxism. Contemporary capitalist formations (neocolonialist, fascist, imperialist, subimperialist) are functional for various incarnations of racism, sexism, and patriarchy. It's also true that capitalism can survive in relations of relative racial and gender equality—capitalism has become multiculturalized, after all.

It is clear to us that race-based or feminist traditions of struggle are no less important or urgent than class-based ones. What an historical materialist approach attempts to highlight is how class operates as a universal form of exploitation whose abolition is central to the abolition of all manifestations of oppression. Class includes a state apparatus whose conquests and regulations create races and shape gender relations. Clearly, constructions of race and ethnicity are implicated in the circulation and process of variable capital. But forms of oppression based on categories of difference do not possess relative autonomy from class relations. Rather, they constitute the ways in which oppression is lived and experienced within a class-based system. And while we acknowledge that class denotes exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production, this does not mean we reduce race to class, or gender to class. We need to see this relation in dialectical terms.

Here we underscore our own approach to social struggle—one that is multi-pronged: We choose to organize against racism, sexism, class oppression, and white supremacy simultaneously as part of a larger anti-imperialist project directed toward the struggle for socialism. We also maintain that forms of nonclass domination such as racism must often be fought in advance of the class struggle. Certainly we cannot make headway in fighting class oppression without fighting racism and sexism. And clearly, racism and sexism must be fought against, and tirelessly so, despite whether or not we have traced their existence to capitalist relations of exploitation. We argue for the explanatory primacy of class in examining all forms of domination and exploitation, but this in no way suggests that class struggle is more important than antiracist struggle, or struggles against patriarchy. By arguing that the most powerful contradiction in capitalist society is that between labor and capital is in no way saying that all we need to do is to bring on the revolution and racism and sexism and homophobia will all melt away by themselves.

It is important to emphasize the importance of hooks's work and that of women who have unrelentingly spoken out against asymmetrical relations of power and the privileging hierarchies of domination and oppression. hooks and others have indeed generated an awareness of the complex web of relations that constitute class-sex-race-gender exploitation. There is, however, a tendency in hooks's work to conflate individuals' objective locations in the intersection of structures of inequality

with individuals' subjective understandings of how they are situated based on their experiences. The notion that class is merely a subjective concept presumably dependent on perception, time, and place in relation to other identities as implied above, confuses class struggle and class consciousness. Class has an objective status; class consciousness on the other hand is undoubtedly shaped and conditioned by social and cultural factors.⁴⁷ hooks's writings clearly focus on class consciousness and her efforts at explaining just what accounts for objective class location is very often found wanting.

At other times, it appears as if hooks views the class system as predicated on an "unequal exchange" of material resources, or that it is located in the sphere of market-exchange, or that it is linked to stratified systems of resource distribution. hooks identifies herself as a "democratic socialist," yet she talks about the redistribution of wealth rather than the dismantling of capitalism:

Those among us who are progressive, who are democratic socialists, know that wealth can be redistributed in ways that challenge and change class exploitation and oppression. As individuals we promote and perpetuate this process of redistribution by both unorganized and organized sharing and giving of resources.⁴⁸

But the most effective way to eliminate class privilege and hierarchy and to "challenge and change class elitism" is to eliminate capitalism.

E. San Juan, Jr. has recently and compellingly articulated why we need to reject a market-relations approach to class analysis that locates discrimination by race in biased monopolistic practices, and why it is ill-advised to conceive of racial inequality in the sphere of unequal exchange.⁴⁹ Our understanding of class is centered on the primordial condition of exploitation within the process of production under capitalism. As San Juan, Jr. notes, as a relation of class antagonisms, class constitutes the salient or fundamental relation for explaining the social totality.⁵⁰ Exploitation is part of the total political economy in specific historical periods or conjunctures.⁵¹ Social class is connected fundamentally to the development of the productive forces and designates a relation of exploitation; consequently it cannot be considered apart from class conflict. Social class is not a discreetly bounded expression of agency outside of the production process and the social division of labor; rather, it is a relational process and must be seen in conjunction with the means of production and located in the central antagonism between capital and labor.⁵² To view class as basically a question of lifestyle or linked to market relations or class hierarchy or privilege too often leads to a casuistic approach to social transformation and a progressive social reform of capitalism as opposed to a preoccupation with the future revolutionary transformation of society. In this regard, hooks's work is more concerned with the pedagogy of revolutionary change than the pedagogy of revolution. hooks's work deals with microeconomic theories but at the intersubjective level. She taps the myriad dynamics and multilayered dimensions of personal narratives where she is able to tease out the antagonisms and contradictions between who people profess to be and how—despite their best intentions—they allow themselves to serve what hooks call the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Despite some of our disappointment with hooks's lack of an explanatory theory of class, her work constitutes some of the most important insights we have in terms of how race and class are lived subjectively in the exigencies of everyday life. As a result, her work is a powerful expression of revolutionary critical pedagogy.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy operates from an understanding that the basis of education is political and that spaces need to be created where students can imagine a different world outside of the social form of capitalist labor, where alternatives to capitalism and capitalist institutions can be discussed and debated, and where dialogue can occur about why so many revolutions in past history turned into their opposite. It looks to create a world where freely associated individuals can successfully work toward a permanent revolution; where the division between mental and manual labor can be abolished; where patriarchal relations and other privileging hierarchies of oppression and exploitation can be ended; and where we can truly exercise the principle "from each according to his or her ability and to each according to his or her need"; where we can traverse the terrain of universal rights unburdened by necessity, moving sensuously and fluidly within that ontological space where subjectivity is exercised as a form of capacity-building and creative self-activity within and as a part of the social totality—a space where labor is no longer exploited and becomes a striving that will benefit all human beings. But we wish to stress that revolutionary critical pedagogy is a pedagogy dedicated to social revolution, one that is grounded in the practice of critique but also in the struggle for a new set of values. The Chilean revolutionary, Marta Harnecker, writes:

[T]he aim of the social revolution "is not only to struggle for survival but to transform one's way of life", as Nicaraguan sociologist Orlando Nunez says, it is necessary for us to venture into the world of morality and love searching for "the direct, daily transformation of one's way of living, thinking and feeling", by creating a new set of values. To wait for this to happen through a simple change in the relations of production is to bet on the mechanistic model we reject.⁵³

Clearly we need to live our revolutionary values, and not simply advocate them publicly. Harnecker warns:

If we struggle for the social liberation of women, we should begin as of now to transform the relationship between man and woman in the heart of the family, to overcome the household division of labor and male chauvinist culture at home. If we think that young people are the raw material of our work, then we should educate them to think for themselves, to adopt their own positions and be capable of defending them, based upon what they feel and think. If we struggle against racial discrimination, we must carry that through into our own lives. If we struggle against the alienation caused by consumerism, then we should translate that into an austere lifestyle. One of the fundamental values that we must teach ourselves and others is that thought and action should be consistent with each other and double standards must be rejected. Che is one of the greatest examples of this.⁵⁴

Like Che, Freire, Harnecker, and other revolutionaries, hooks recognizes the importance of living a new, coherent set of values consistent with the project of social transformation. She writes:

We understood economic self-sufficiency to be a crucial goal of feminist movement. However, we also believed, a belief now affirmed by experience, that it was possible for us to gain class power without betraying our solidarity toward those without class privilege. One way that we achieved this end was by living simply, sharing our resources, and refusing to engage in hedonistic consumerism and the politics of greed. Our goals were not to become wealthy but to become economically self-sufficient. Our experiences counter the assumption that women could only gain economically by colluding with the existing capitalist patriarchy.⁵⁵

Harnecker maintains that “the new morality should tend to make the contradictions between social and individual values disappear by aspiring to build a world of cooperation, solidarity and love.”⁵⁶ hooks would undoubtedly agree. But it remains the challenge for all of us to bring this about in our own work and struggle. And here we can look to the work of bell hooks to help us in this urgent task.

Notes

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3. *Chencha* is the name given to the “manly woman” spiritist in Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
4. Zamudio-Taylor, *Frida Kahlo*.
5. Frida Kahlo, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo*, compiler Martha Zamora (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 104–105.
6. hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999).
7. M. Mies, *Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research. Theories of Women’s Studies*, ed. Gloria Bowles and Renate Dueli Klein (New York: Routledge, 1983), 118.
8. hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
9. See the discussion of George W. Bush in N. Klein, “Disowned by the Ownership Society,” *The Nation* February 18, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080218/klein> (accessed October 16, 2008).
10. Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?*, 22.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2000).
12. hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?*, 87.
13. *Ibid.*, 114.
14. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 159.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 37.
17. *Ibid.*, 36.
18. bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1989), 28.
19. *Ibid.*, 21.
20. Mies, *Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research*.
21. Nathalia Jaramillo, “Las Madres, Urban Schools and Nepantla Pedagogy” (PhD diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007).

22. hooks, *Talking Back*, 22.
23. hooks, *Where We Stand*.
24. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 104.
25. Ibid., 105.
26. Ibid., 109.
27. Ibid.
28. hooks, *Talking Back*, 30.
29. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 15.
30. Ibid., 13.
31. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 171.
32. Ibid., 195.
33. hooks, *Yearning*, 145.
34. V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 1974).
35. See Nathalia Jaramillo and Peter McLaren. "Rethinking Critical Pedagogy: Socialismo Nepantla and the Specter of Che," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norm Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, and Linda Smith (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).
36. Adrienne Rich, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985, 1987* (New York: Norton Paperback, 1984), 212.
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39. E. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 262-263.
40. T. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
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44. H. Bannerji, *Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism and Anti-Racism* (Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press, 1995), 30.
45. See the discussion of Ollman in Jaramillo and McLaren, "Rethinking Critical Pedagogy."
46. See V. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Peter McLaren, "Class Dismissed? Historical Materialism and the Politics of Difference," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36 no. 2 (2004):183-199.
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48. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 158.
49. E. San Juan Jr., "Marxism and the Race/Class Problematic: A Re-Articulation." *Cultural Logic* (2003). <http://eserver.org/clogic/2003/sanjuan.html>.
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53. M. Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).
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2

Engaging Whiteness and the Practice of Freedom

The Creation of Subversive Academic Spaces

GEORGE YANCY

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 13)

The purpose of an epigraph is to provide readers with a sense of the central motif that is to be explored and engaged within the body of a piece of writing. Hence, my objective in this chapter is to delineate and highlight aspects of bell hooks's critical pedagogy that frame the critical pedagogical ethos that I attempt to create and enact within the space of a classroom. I am specifically interested in how hooks's critical pedagogy helps to frame my pedagogical engagement with predominantly white students within the context of teaching courses in philosophy where the central philosophical theme is race. What is clear from the above epigraph is hooks's suggestion that there is an important bridge between modalities of teaching that respect and care for the souls of students and creating the necessary conditions where engaged learning has a profound and personal impact. Within the context of the classroom, hooks provides a succinct delineation of her critical pedagogy:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.¹

Hence, for hooks, the classroom is a location of possibility, a site that has within it the potential for change and transformation. As a site of possibility, hooks understands the classroom as a space of fluidity, transgression, movement, challenge, growth, and metastability.

hooks suggests that it is within the field of possibility that we have the occasion to *labor* for freedom qua collective transformational possibilities. Hence, a matrix of possibility functions as the condition for the occasion to labor and work for freedom. "Laboring for freedom" is probably the last thing that students think of when

they enroll in a course. After all, their sense of themselves as free and autonomous is something that the ideology of liberalism has already taught them. My sense is that by “laboring for freedom” hooks presupposes that there are expressions and layers of freedom that must be fought for to be achieved. Laboring for freedom in the classroom suggests that it involves effort, work, endurance, diligence, and an implicit awareness of incompleteness. Indeed, stressing the significance of laboring for freedom within the context of the classroom implies the reinforcement of new and radical ways of interrogating and conceptualizing what *ought* to take place within the space of a classroom. And while learning new facts is certainly necessary in a classroom, it is not sufficient in terms of demanding of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart. Demanding of ourselves *and* our comrades speaks to the emphasis that hooks places on the importance of relationships. It is important that openness of mind and heart is a mutual experience, one shared between members of the classroom. Openness of mind and heart creates the possibility of being touched by the other, transformed by the other, even as one maintains a healthy sense of criticality. It is within a community of others that the self is challenged and transformed, that we are taken “out of ourselves,”² that the sense of self-certainty might be challenged and shattered.

For hooks, it is not enough that we open our minds; it is also important that we open our hearts. There are no doubt many who would argue that this sounds too “soft,” too romantic, too Pascalian. On this view, the heart has no place where rigorous thought and dispassionate argumentation are required or even demanded. However, hooks is calling into question the assumption that learning is primarily an intellectual process, one that is emotionless and free of feelings and thereby free of ambiguity. As a philosopher, I have noticed that many philosophers bring various unquestioned pedagogical assumptions to the learning process and to the classroom. For example, philosophers tend to privilege the mind over the body. The body is viewed as an impediment to knowledge. The body is identified with passion, suffering, the erotic, and is deemed unwieldy. Hence, as philosophers, we are often expected to enter our classrooms as disembodied, as abstract minds, as spectral beings. As hooks notes, “Entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom.”³ hooks links the assumption regarding the split between the mind and the body to “the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism.”⁴ Hence, to strive for wholeness—a mode of being and pedagogical engagement that does not fragment the self—within the context of the classroom is to transgress deep and perennial philosophical narratives which tend to bifurcate the self and perpetuate the assumption that learning and knowledge are divorced from embodiment.

The silent hegemonic norms of the profession of philosophy don’t appear to be concerned with our integrity and honesty of heart, the upsurge of passion and suffering that we often feel as we grapple with ideas, the integrity of our spirits, our sense of wholeness, our sense of embodiment and finitude, and that we are ensconced within the mundane matters of everyday life. Such hegemonic norms support pedagogical assumptions that make us alien to ourselves. The buttressing

of such norms breeds self-alienation, dishonesty, and encourages the creation of a chasm between theory and practice. In fact, the intellect becomes privileged over the importance of ethical practices vis-à-vis questions of personal integrity and a deep commitment to processes of self-actualization. While the academic scholar might have no sense of genuine compassion and care for others, he or she might possess a publication record that is extraordinary, one that reflects well on the department and the university more generally. hooks argues that the lack of concern for wholeness has “been replaced with notions that being smart meant that one was inherently emotionally unstable and that the best in oneself emerged in one’s academic work.”⁷⁵ While the so-called genius might be emotionally unstable, he or she can still think with extraordinary intellectual power and lucidity. It is not the “bizarre” behavior and emotional instability of the genius that matters; it is the individual’s pristine mind that really matters. After all, geniuses are supposed to be peculiar. Fleshing out the implications of this pedagogical outlook, hooks writes, “This meant that whether academics were drug addicts, alcoholics, batterers, or sexual abusers, the only important aspect of our identity was whether or not our minds functioned, whether we were able to do our jobs in the classroom.”⁷⁶

For hooks, engaged pedagogy is very demanding; it “means that teachers [professors] must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”⁷⁷ By self-actualization, hooks has in mind not only the idea of someone who is engaged in autocritique, self-exploration, and interior healing, but someone engaged in outward movement toward the other, someone willing and eager to transform the other and be transformed by the other in rich and positive ways. In other words, self-actualization, while *centripetal*, is not hermetically antisocial. Self-actualization, while *centrifugal*, does not lose sight of the importance of silence and the need for being alone, for self-examination. Hence, this inward-outward movement is not contradictory, but harmoniously interdependent. Hooks maintains that self-actualization is “the coming into greater awareness not only of *who we are* but our relationship *within community* which is so profoundly political.”⁷⁸

hooks notes that, “In the United States it is rare that anyone talks about teachers in university settings as healers. And it is even more rare to hear anyone suggest that teachers have any responsibility to be self-actualized individuals.”⁷⁹ It was the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, both teacher and activist, that influenced hooks’s notion of the teacher as a healer. hooks’s discourse of healing, however, is not a discourse grounded in mysterious incantations. By healing, in stream with Thich Nhat Hanh, she suggests working toward a form of wholeness, a concept that also connotes restoration, integrity, and processes of overcoming/transcendence. Hence, the teacher/professor as healer is one who strives to encourage wholeness. As healers, teachers/professors will encourage educational experiences (etymologically, a “leading out”) that lead students to seek greater levels of self-exploration and integrity, which means encouraging students to bring their entire selves—raced, gendered, classed—to bear upon the learning process. hooks is critical of the view that race, gender, sexual orientation, or class are deemed nugatory to the learning process. In short, such aspects of the self are usually deemed nonconstitutive and

hence can be and ought to be abandoned at the classroom door. “The self was,” hooks argues, “presumably emptied out the moment the threshold was crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind.”¹⁰

There are philosophers who firmly believe that “real” philosophy dispenses with the body. In fact, they hold the position that philosophy is a “pure” mode of inquiry, a practice that ought to be taught with a deep sense of seriousness, commitment to abstraction, and conducted in terms of a form of intellectual stoicism. Prostrating themselves before the all-discerning light of *reason* is their pedagogical motto, while they sing a requiem to the death of embodied passion. In fact, I have met philosophers who seem to believe that philosophy should not be fun. Laughter is an indication of too much play and too little “serious” thinking. As hooks points out, those of us who attempt to exemplify in our practices new and progressive forms of pedagogy must worry about how we deal with the ways in which our colleagues perceive us. She notes, “I’ve actually had colleagues say to me, ‘Students seem to really enjoy your class. What are you doing wrong?’”¹¹

When I teach, particularly those courses that deal with issues around race, it is not that reason has somehow died at the door; rather, I must bring the entirety of myself to the classroom. I bring the self that is emotive; the self that is genuinely *happy* to teach courses that matter to students as they negotiate the existential trenches of life; the self that has been wounded by racism; the self that has biases yet to be explored; the self that is attuned to the subtlety of racism; the self that is capable of effectively dealing with heated controversy over longstanding race related issues; the self that might become the unintended or intended target of racism in the classroom; the black self upon whom racist stereotypes are projected; the self that must be ready for racist remarks exchanged between students and the self that must be prepared to help students think critically through such exchanges; the self that must create balance when critical dialogue borders on the precipice of turning into a blaming game; the self that gets ecstatic when I see real transformation take place in the classroom; the self who must and often does provide a safe space for tears; indeed, the self that, at times, also feels hopeless in the face of so much racism in and outside the classroom.

Pedagogically engaging issues of race and racism calls for deeper levels of analysis; it involves exploring those aspects of the self that often operate beneath the radar of consciousness. The transformation of consciousness must not be limited to pedagogies that stress the mere transformation of concepts. Rather, the transformation of consciousness is linked to a form of critical pedagogy that provides “students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully.”¹² Emphasis is also placed on what one *does in the world*. hooks does not reject the love of ideas, but she links this love to a passion for “the quest for knowledge that enables us to unite theory and practice.”¹³ In this way, “the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears.”¹⁴ Hence, self-actualization in relationship to issues of race and racism is not simply about one’s ability to comprehend concepts in the confines of a classroom. According to hooks, the world outside and the inside walls

of the academy constitute a continuum. Also, the so-called private, interior world of the self is always already *in the world*. While it is important for hooks that practices of freedom take place within the context of the classroom, spaces that often teach conformity, such practices must extend beyond the classroom. Healers, in this case both teachers/professors and students, are not navel gazers, but committed to social praxis. In short, we must act and reflect “upon the world in order to change it.”¹⁵

One of my white undergraduate female students wrote a very insightful paper which she entitled, “Racism: Etched into Our Souls.” After discussing ways in which racist effective history deeply shapes who we are, she explored the question of how we might *de-etch* (her term) the racism that is so etched into our souls and our society. The word *etch* is etymologically linked to a word which means *to eat*. This is a powerful metaphor. In short, my student was interested in ways that whites internalize racism and how they might find ways of refusing “to eat,” to ingest, the madness and disease of racism. Of course, there is another sense in which we “etch” our own perceptions onto the Other and thereby frame them and socio-ontologically freeze them according to our desires and fears, imprison them, confiscate their integrity, and “eat them,” making them into a version of ourselves, reducing their otherness to the *same*. While my student did not pick up on the rich metaphorical implications of the process of etching, she did emphasize the importance of both reflection and practice. Her paper was *not* about what we *think*, but what we have *become* in our souls as a result of our overconsumption of racism and how this negatively impacts the entire society. She wrote that “unless we are constantly participating [a clear signifier of practice and action] in the battle against racism it can never be overcome.” Hence, in her paper, she not only stressed the importance of fighting against racism at the level of direct participation/action, but she emphasized the importance of caring for the soul. This student, perhaps one of a few, picked up on the importance of how racism actually militates against spiritual well-being and how it destroys the soul. The class had read the works of critical whiteness theorists who made it their primary objective to heal their “soul wounds” caused by the internalization of racist outlooks. Perhaps the exposure to these experiences will enable this student (and other students) to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as one who seeks wholeness, particularly wholeness vis-à-vis combating the internalization of racist outlooks and deracinating racist sensibilities. Sharing information about her disappointment during her actual experience of college in terms of the teaching profession, hooks notes, “It was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole—well-grounded in a context where there was little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul.”¹⁶

Those students who do strive for more than “academic excellence,” defined as the accumulation of facts and the ability to reiterate those facts upon command, function as threats to those teachers/professors who see it as their job to produce good functionaries, those who would prefer to keep academic spaces free of too much controversy, too much interrogation, too much dialogue, too much risk, creativity, and imagination, elements that are crucial and indispensable for self-flourishing and wholeness. hooks notes, “Not surprisingly, professors who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part

of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization.”¹⁷ From her own *personal experiences*, which she deploys as a source of positional knowledge that speaks to the interiority of her suffering and joy, hooks notes, “Most of my professors were not the slightest bit interested in enlightenment. More than anything they seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom.”¹⁸

For teachers/professors who see their role as epistemic autocrats, as it were, there is very little or no room for a sense of epistemic shared space with their students and within the context of their classrooms. Those who would dare insightfully question the teacher/professor, revealing gaps, inconsistencies, conservatism in the latter’s knowledge, are deemed troublemakers, marginal, confused, naïve. Like political autocrats, authority is expressed top-down and there is often no room for forms of political or epistemic diversity, particularly as this might engender dissent and critical discussion. hooks believes “that our work [as teachers/professors] is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.”¹⁹ An engaged pedagogical space, then, is one where a plurality of voices are valorized, where students are participants in the space of transformative speech and action, where students are not threatened to engage the teacher/professor through the process of *elenchus*. Important here is that students are not passively waiting to consume knowledge from the lips of those who deem themselves gods. hooks’s emphasis on a shared space of pedagogical engagement includes inviting students to shape the content and outcome of the learning process. She notes, “On another day, I might ask students to ponder what we want to make happen in the class, to name what we hope to know, what might be most useful.”²⁰ In this single act, hooks effectively challenges the teacher/professor as epistemic autocrat and positions her students as cocreators in the learning experience. By encouraging students to participate in this fashion, hooks deploys a profound pedagogical intervention, calling forth her students as subjects and agents. She engages in a form of interpellation whereby students are given the opportunity to respond to the hail in ways that provide for them a sense of profound inclusion and historical agency. She creates a space of “we-learners” and “we-knowers,” a space where roles are creatively fluid, not calcified and rigid. Indeed, through her pedagogical openness to sharing major classroom decisions, she demonstrates a profound sense of respect for her students as independent thinkers, thinkers with complex and nuanced embodied voices, voices that are not afraid to disagree or “back talk.” Within the type of engaged pedagogical spaces that hooks envisions, “back talk”²¹ loses its signification of impudence or being sassy. Indeed, hooks emphasizes the “complex recognition of the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued.”²² In recognizing each and every voice, and affirming the value of each voice within the classroom, hooks is critiquing privileged educational institutions where students feel *entitled* to speak, “that their voices deserve to be heard”²³ in contrast to students from working class backgrounds who attend public institutions. hooks is particularly invested in those student voices that are marginalized because “professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of

ideas.”²⁴ hooks wants to encourage a dialogical space where students are able to see themselves as “speaking subject[s] worthy of voice.”²⁵ As speaking subjects worthy of voice, it is not enough that students name their personal experiences. Rather, they must also cross-examine the experiences of others (students/teachers/professors) and respond in critically engaged ways “to knowledge presented.”²⁶

Given hooks’s notion of a mutually engaged pedagogy, students share in classroom power, help shape the direction of the classroom discussion, and make significant contributions to epistemological issues (what is known, what is knowable, what is valued as knowable) and social ontological issues (who am I, what structural mechanisms partly constitute who I am, what I desire, and how I/we see myself/others). hooks shares that on entering “the classroom at the beginning of the semester the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners *together*.”²⁷ It is this goal that positions hooks as a colearner. Yet, she is cognizant of the power that she holds and does not claim outright equality, but that “together we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context.”²⁸ For hooks, power is not intrinsically negative. In fact, she had to transcend her fear of power, that is, forms of coercive power and abuse that she had witnessed being exercised over those who lacked power. Instead, for hooks, the meaning of power “depended [on] what one did with it.”²⁹ Hence, education as the practice of freedom and transgression is incompatible with the deployment of despotic rule. It is not contradictory, according to hooks, for students to demand knowledge that is meaningful to their lives and yet refuse to accept the guidance of their teachers/professors. hooks writes, “This is one of the joys of education as the practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their own choices.”³⁰

For hooks, a liberatory education is one that encourages excitement and transgression. I have met philosophers who appear to think that the practice of philosophy was never meant to be exciting, never meant to challenge the boundaries of western canonical purity, and never meant to link philosophical practices explicitly to issues of power, sexism, classism, and racism. Challenge the foundations of Greek philosophy through alternative stories that link Greek thought to earlier African influences and one’s counternarrative is said to be apocryphal. Have the fortitude to raise the issue of how Immanuel Kant’s racism impacts his ethics and one’s inquiry is dismissed as a form of reductionism. Raise the issue of the existence of black philosophy and one is assured that philosophy transcends issues of race. Even as *white* bodies dominate the profession and generate ideas that speak to their social existence, philosophy as a view from nowhere is defended and preserved tooth and nail, though, I would argue, in bad faith. It is within such contexts that certain forms of creative thought are deemed a threat. So-called safe classrooms are those that suppress serious and probing questions that interrogate “sacred” boundaries. Safe classrooms are those that don’t interrogate the lack of self-transformative practices; that don’t interrogate pedagogical approaches that refuse to value the whole person in terms of her multiple standpoints and how these standpoints shape knowledge-claims. Indeed, safe classrooms are those that teach us to conform through the deployment of false choices. We are also taught *how* to pose questions,

how to remain “calm” when discussing ideas, *how* to impress those in positions of academic authority, *how* to speak academese, and how to gesticulate and engage in body postures that signify power, authority, academic, and cultural refinement.

Not only am I *excited* by ideas, but I *feel* the transformative dimensions of wrestling with ideas. Furthermore, this excitement is deeply *embodied*; it is not captured in a “pure” moment of abstract contemplation, but induces shuddering and ecstasy. Within this context, ecstasy also signifies transgression, that sense of standing outside of one’s self, moving against old habits of being, of *becoming* more than what is dictated by the status quo, and the *pleasure* and *passion* of self-flourishing. hooks notes, “Even though many viewers could applaud a movie like *The Dead Poets Society*, possibly identifying with the passion of the professor and his students, rarely is such passion institutionally affirmed.”³¹ hooks observes that “students are desperately yearning to be touched by knowledge, [but] professors still fear the challenge, allow their worries about losing control to override their desires to teach.”³² Hence, not only are students surveilled by teachers/professors who encourage academic lockstep, but the latter engage in destructive forms of self-censorship for fear of caring “about teaching in uniquely passionate and different ways.”³³ I recall a black student of mine who was really worried about my safety and job security because I dared to ask white students to raise their hands if they thought of themselves as racists. Of course, I always make a point of asking my male students a similar question: “So, are there any males in here who see themselves as sexists?” There are those rare moments, in both cases, when hands go up. And while we later collectively discuss what is meant by racism and sexism, I am impressed with the boldness and honesty of those few students who had initially raised their hands, and their risk of self-ascription within the midst of their peers. I recall that one white female student confided in me after class: “The [white] girl next to me was like, ‘Did you *hear* the question he asked?’” The student who confided in me had a different take. She went on to say how she felt completely comfortable with the question that I posed. What troubled me, though, was my black student’s perception of the power of universities and how that power can affect my attempt to teach in uniquely passionate and different ways. Embedded within her concern was the recognition that there is something threatening about posing questions that are direct and that shake students out of their intellectual and personal comfort zones, especially when it comes to issues around race. By implication, though sadly, her point was that many universities don’t really value practices of freedom or are at least equivocal regarding such practices. Also, as she spoke, there was a moment of implicit mutual recognition of a shared historical memory: I’m a black male teaching a course filled predominantly with white students within the context of a larger predominantly white university. And while I feel comfortable with the pedagogical style that I have adopted, the legacy of racism in America informed her fears and shaped our mutual understanding. Yet, this pedagogical style of speaking and being—which actually creates an important sense of community and a space of mutual trust within my classrooms—has a way of cutting through individual and collective denial around highly charged issues of race and racism. As Patricia Williams argues, “Creating community...involves this difficult work of negotiating real divisions of considering boundaries before we go

crashing through, and of pondering our differences before we can ever agree on the terms of our sameness.”³⁴ Williams sees “the discounted vision of the emperor’s new clothes [as] already the description of corrupted community.”³⁵

Fear and forms of control that disempower students and teachers/professors belie educational practices of freedom and militate against forms of communal learning that valorize honesty and parrhesia or fearless speech. For hooks, a learning context is not one where teachers/professors use “the classroom to enact rituals of control that [are] about domination and the unjust exercise of power.”³⁶ Engaged pedagogy creates conditions that enhance self-reflexivity and critical thinking. According to hooks, “Engaged pedagogy has been essential to my development as an intellectual, as a teacher/professor because the heart of this approach to learning is critical thinking.”³⁷ Critical thinking can be perceived as dangerous within pedagogical spaces that demand and sanction conformity. Hence, on this score, critical thinking is discouraged and policed. Ann Berlak argues that “teachers, like the police, are servants of the state.”³⁸ And if this is true, then teaching to transgress must challenge the ways in which larger apparatuses of political control are linked to educational institutions, and, by extension, classrooms that attempt to domesticate³⁹ students and teachers/professors alike. The deeper political implications raised here are reflected in hooks’s observation that her “commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of *political activism*.”⁴⁰ hooks argues that it is because “our educational institutions are so deeply invested in a *banking system*, teachers are more rewarded when we do not teach against the grain. The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences.”⁴¹ For hooks, to teach against the grain speaks to the desire and practice of engaging *with* students to nourish counterhegemonic habits and modes of being. Working against the grain is not a simple matter of possessing a “contrary” attitude. After all, having a contrary attitude does not ipso facto mean that one *yearns* for change, that one actually engages social reality in order to overturn systems of oppression that submerge modes of critical consciousness. hooks’s notion of working against the grain is inextricably linked to Brazilian activist, theorist, and educator Paulo Freire’s conception of problem-posing, which is a pedagogical approach that “involves a constant unveiling of reality,”⁴² one that “strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.”⁴³

Despite her critique of the sexist language in Paulo Freire’s liberatory discourse, hooks is in stream with Freire, critical of the banking system of education (a term that he, to my knowledge, coined). Indeed, hooks notes that her experiences with Freire “restored [her] faith in liberatory education.”⁴⁴ Freire’s critical insights provided hooks with the support that she required to confront critically “the ‘banking system’ of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it.”⁴⁵ It is important to remember that Freire’s pedagogy of liberation, with its stress upon political, educational, and existential liberation, was developed within the context of Brazil, where he (and other subaltern peasants) experienced oppression and hunger. In fact, Freire was imprisoned and exiled for his decision to teach the silenced to transgress and engage in practices of freedom.

Undergirding his critical pedagogy is a philosophical anthropology that frames how he theorizes the importance of the existential and historical complexity of human reality and how this complexity sheds light on other sites of oppression and domination. Coming out of a rural southern experiential background, hooks gravitated to Freire's language of transgression and liberation as she was beginning to grapple critically with "the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that takes place in the United States."⁴⁶

hooks discerns, within the context of the United States, what Freire refers to as "attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole."⁴⁷ It is these attitudes and practices that are characteristic of the banking system of education. I list five of these attitudes and practices here:

1. The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
2. The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
3. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
4. The teacher talks and the students listen—meekly.
5. The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.

Within the context of the banking system of education there is no calling out to the other, no movement toward the other (the student), as an agent with her own ideas and insights. The teacher/professor rejects education as a mutual process of *becoming*. As Freire argues, "The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his existence."⁴⁸

Given the insidious ways in which institutional and embodied racism thwart thematization and examination, the ethos of the banking system of education in the United States—where issues of racism are displaced onto "those white supremacists" and where students are made to feel like "good whites" because they have never lynched a black body or owned any blacks as slaves—is complicit with the prolongation of *uncritical* practices of liberation that sustain the hegemony of whiteness.⁴⁹ For Freire, those who are committed to the practice of freedom must reject "the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled."⁵⁰ White students who have been fed on the ideological pablum of the banking system of education come to see themselves as "good whites" without any racist blemishes. Partly, this is because they have been told, *have had information deposited*, that racism has ceased to exist in our contemporary moment. The "banking system of education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world."⁵¹ The banking system of education, according to Freire, "emphasizes permanence and becomes reactionary."⁵² For Freire, the banking system of education isolates "consciousness from the world,"⁵³ thus militating against, on my view, whites engaging in the dynamic process of problem-posing, as opposed to being *reactionary*. According to Freire, "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves."⁵⁴ In the case of whites, they often exist in profound states of bad faith regarding their

white privilege, inhabiting spaces of world-making efforts that are fueled by racist hegemony and where whiteness functions as a transcendental norm. Hence, I see problem-posing as a form of demythologizing vis-à-vis whiteness. What whites had not seen as a problem at all—their white privilege—comes to stand out through the process of problem-posing. Freire notes: “That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications... begins to ‘stand out,’ assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge.”⁵⁵ He continues, “Thus, [white] men and women begin to single out elements from their ‘background awareness’ and to reflect upon them. These elements are now objects of their consideration, and as such, objects of their action and cognition.”⁵⁶ Ann Berlak construes this process in reference to figure/ground perceptual organization. She argues, “For most [white] students who come into class, a meritocratic framework is ascendant; it is the ‘figure,’ and white supremacy [whiteness] is the pale and mostly invisible ‘ground,’ or background.”⁵⁷

Through the work that I do in the classroom, in stream with hooks and Berlak, I try “to accomplish a reversal.”⁵⁸ This process of reversal is not easy, especially as white students have come to identify whiteness with what it means to be human or what it means to be American or simply a person. In short, their whiteness has become invisible. And just when the possibility of a slippage is on the horizon, just when there is the possibility that their whiteness begins to “stand out” as a problem to be dealt with, society reinforces whiteness as normative, pushing it further into the background. Hence, within the context of my classes dealing with race and racism, a site where I actively *name* whiteness, there is often tension. Not only are the majority of my students not prepared to take the journey involved in exploring what it means to be white, of rethinking issues around whiteness, power, and meritocracy, and rethinking the subtle ways in which white racism gets expressed through embodied habits and uninterrogated values and ways of looking at the world, but just when those who are willing begin to problem-pose their whiteness, where whiteness as a set of historical practices and institutional practices begins to emerge as a *problem*, larger social practices and norms (outside the classroom) reinforce their situation as normative, unproblematic. That deepened sense of active and engaged consciousness that *we* were able to effect within the context of that *collective* pedagogical space, within the limits of specific temporal constraints, resigns itself, becomes passive and receptive to processes of interpellation that hail the white self, hail white consciousness, forcing “accommodation to the normalized ‘today.’”⁵⁹ Of course, there are other times, through critically engaged *dialogue*, mutually shared *naming*, that my white students begin to problem-pose their whiteness, thus creating a lived phenomenological sense of lack, a liminal moment, where they recognize that whiteness, as the transcendental norm, not only distorts reality, but limits how they see themselves. One white undergraduate student of mine, after taking a course that I designed entitled “Film and Race,” wrote the following in one of his papers:

I enrolled in this course strictly to fulfill a lingering philosophy requirement, and thought that I might as well see a few movies while I was at it. I am pleased to say, the course far exceeded these meager expectations. I was frequently

challenged by our film-based discussions and readings throughout the semester, being forced to consider alternative perspectives and viewpoints. I learned quickly that the images in films always have a context, and should never be taken at face value. I was forced to reevaluate many of my personal beliefs and assumptions regarding race, some of which were more than surprising. It is safe to say that my journey through this course was not always a comfortable one (never have I been exposed to such *parrhesia* in the classroom) but it was certainly enlightening.

Through critical dialogue around film, through collective sharing and honesty, the student came to shift his perspective not only about the importance of the course, but to shift his consciousness about whiteness. He came to *name* his engagement with the course differently. The banking system would not have provided the conditions necessary for the level of insight, transformation, naming, and disclosure demonstrated within the body of my student's paper. The course actually encouraged the student to rethink his assumptions, to be surprised (and perhaps even shocked) by them, to inhabit a space and place that were *not comfortable*. But this is what it means to engage in practices of freedom. "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality."⁶⁰ I recall another student saying to me once after class that he would never look at the movie *King Kong* (and certainly not the racial semiotics of "beauty" and the "beast") in the same way. I also had students who said to me: "I can't stop seeing racism since your class." Freire says, "Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*."⁶¹ In these cases, whiteness did not remain the insipid and invisible "ground"; whiteness *became* the figure, a reversal had taken place.

In the "Film and Race" course, I made sure that my students posed their own whiteness in relation to the movies that we watched. Not only did they find deeply problematic the racism that they witnessed on the screen, but many of them communicated feelings of embarrassment, implying a mode of feeling uncomfortable in their skin. They were able to see the link between whiteness performed on the screen in the form of innocence, purity, paternalism, hatred, and power vis-à-vis blacks (and other people of color) and then further link the filmic space of white semiotics with their own whiteness, closing the gap between "those whites" and "us." This sort of consciousness is possible when "safety" in the classroom is defined by values that emphasize a nonpenalizing openness. In fact, according to hooks, "It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement."⁶² Concretely, this openness means that various subtle and at times not so subtle levels of white racism get expressed. For example, I recall one white male student when asked if he believed race to be real raised his hand in excitement and exclaimed, "Yes. Why do you think blacks dominate the NBA?" Another white male student, frustrated with the ways in which racist institutional structures continue to position him as racist, even as he struggles to fight against his own racism, said, "If society will continue to position me as a racist because I'm white, why don't I/we just become racists?" A white female student once wrote in a paper that white men are discriminated against because black men have larger

penises. Apparently, she actually believed that white men constituted a disadvantaged group because their penises (or so she believed) were smaller. These moments can become difficult, triggering frustration, bewilderment, and anger. But as Freire says, “How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others.”⁶³ Within the context of the “Film and Race” course, by defending and practicing an open and engaged pedagogy, I was (we were) able to create a subversive academic space. In this course, I frequently shared with my students just how impressed I was with their critical engagement with the filmic texts and how particularly fortunate I felt to have so many students who demonstrated so much passion, candidness, and openness. As hooks notes, “Conditions of radical openness exist in any learning situation where students and teachers celebrate their abilities to think critically, to engage in pedagogical praxis.”⁶⁴ My aim was not to engage my students in theory to make them “more brainy.” Rather, as hooks notes, I engaged them in “the production of theory as a social practice that can be liberatory.”⁶⁵ hooks shares that she “came to theory because [she] was hurting...[and that she wanted] to grasp what was happening around and within [her].”⁶⁶ I encourage my students to think about their engagement with theory (or the need to engage theory) as an exercise in living, as part of an *existential* project; and that theory might assist and be assisted by the complex struggles, fears, and pains that we all experience.

My students had begun to engage ideas, experiment with ideas, and theorize social behaviors (their own and others’) around the theme of whiteness beyond the classroom proper. Then, again, my aim was to encourage my students to nurture practices of freedom that extend beyond the confines of our collective academic space. I emphasized a noncompartmental approach to thinking and doing, creating an organic link between reflection, everyday life practices, and habituated modes being. My approach to teaching the value of philosophy emphasizes the important point that an engaged form of *collective* elenchus has the potential for creating conditions that help to make us into better human beings. My hope is that such conditions will inspire white students that I teach to think of themselves as historical beings, not simply “in” and “of” history, but *makers* of history, as *agents* in history. This raises profound issues regarding the importance of responsibility in relation to white privilege. While it is often difficult, my objective is to encourage my white students to comprehend the ways in which their consciousness has been shaped by various historical practices and norms. In fact, even more difficult, is getting them to begin to think about their consciousness and habits of being as *contingent*. I encourage them to grasp themselves as neither complete before they enter upon the historical scene nor complete after they enter upon the historical scene. It is important that they begin to see themselves “for whom immobility represents a fatal threat,”⁶⁷ particularly as whiteness is invested in maintaining not only institutional power, but somatic power as culturally inscribed in white bodies. This understanding of human reality is consistent with a problem-posing pedagogy. As Freire notes, “problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with likewise unfinished reality.”⁶⁸ My aim is to encourage them to see themselves beyond the security of “some such thing in general.”⁶⁹ Hence, there is the desire that they become

critically subjective about their being-in-the-world, but never to lose sight of how their subjectivity is historically situated. And because whiteness is insidious, it is important that they understand the diligence involved in continuously engaging one's whiteness. There is no single action that will rid one of racism. It requires constant readjustment of the self vis-à-vis complex forces. As Søren Kierkegaard says of the uncertainty of death, "To think this uncertainly once and for all, or once a year at matins on New Year's morning, is nonsense, of course, and is not to think at all."⁷⁰ To think about race only when passing black bodies on the street is not to make *whiteness as raced* an object of critical consciousness at all.

As a white person, Peggy McIntosh came to realize that she "had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which [put her] at an advantage."⁷¹ She defines white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets which [she] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [she] was 'meant' to remain oblivious."⁷² Again this raises the issue of the importance of responsibility vis-à-vis white privilege. "For describing white privilege," as McIntosh argues, "makes one newly accountable."⁷³ Prior to introducing the work of McIntosh to my white students, they are convinced that who and what they have become has absolutely nothing to do with their whiteness. The few African American students in the class are able to articulate with fairly convincing reasons how "blackness" functions as an obstacle to them in a world where whiteness is hegemonic. The white students have learned to cut whiteness off from its historical formation, its colonial history, its history of terror, and its current hegemonic practices. Hence, whiteness, in their eyes, is incidental to their identity. This way of thinking about their identity "downplay[s] the necessity of keeping alive [or even developing] a subversive memory of critique and resistance by precisely evading the role of history in the production and meaning of whiteness."⁷⁴ Frances E. Kendall shares a time that she was a guest speaker in a predominantly white class. Kendall had gone there to discuss whiteness and its impact on her life as a white woman. She writes:

Most of the students were either listening or pretending to, but one young woman appeared agitated. Suddenly she burst out, "I don't want you to see me as white!" I was puzzled; she had very white skin and red hair. I wasn't sure I could see her as anything else. "How would you like me to see you?" I asked. "I want you to see me as Jane!"⁷⁵

Using this example, I get my students to think about the ways in which differently raced bodies are able to comport themselves in a mode of purported singularity of identity: I am Jane! After thinking in greater detail about whiteness as privilege, my students come to recognize Jane's demand as a form of bad faith. Hence, I encourage my students to engage in the process of renaming Jane as *white* Jane, and by doing so, repositioning Jane within the context of effective history. Of course, this also has the impact of effectively shifting how my white students begin to think about the ways in which they have attempted to evade their own whiteness. I recall one student of mine who complained, "I think that we've talked enough about whiteness." He implied that once they learned "the basic premise of whiteness," so to speak, things

begin to get a bit redundant. I addressed this by pointing out that most of the white students in the course had come from predominantly white backgrounds. In fact, many of the white students in my courses had gone to schools where there was only one person of color in the entire school or had come from neighborhoods where no people of color resided. “For the last 21 years of your lives you have not had to think about your whiteness, to name it, to make it an object of critical consciousness. We meet for a little over one hour, two times a week, for about 4 months. I can assure you that we have only scratched the surface of whiteness.” It is as if he had reduced whiteness down to a few concepts that once memorized had been enough. For those other whites in the classroom who may have found it difficult to explore their whiteness or those who thought it strange to talk about whiteness in the first place, my one student’s comment may have provided them with an easy way to rationalize moving on to another subject—a form of rationalization that may have been linked to a deeper apprehension of confronting their responsibility in sustaining white racist practices.

I have often wondered to what extent my being a black male mediates the responses of my white students. If I was a white professor engaging students to discuss whiteness critically, I wonder if my one white student would have said the same thing, and if he had would it have been motivated from the same place. Does my black body create levels of defensiveness in my white students that a white body would not? For example, I can imagine a male student saying to a woman teaching a course on gender, “Haven’t we discussed patriarchy long enough?” In the previous example, whiteness as raced and a site of power is to be evaded. In this scenario, maleness as gendered and a site of power is to be evaded. I recall asking my students what was so historically unique about the Obama–Clinton race. Without a pause, many of them said, race and gender. After a critically engaged discussion they came to see that they had *marked* blackness and femaleness in ways that they had not marked whiteness and maleness in previous elections. Indeed, they came to see that presidential elections had always been about race and gender (that is, unmarked *white men*).

Again, however, does my black body make a difference? I think so. And yet, that I am black,⁷⁶ and that there are a few other nonwhite bodies in my classrooms, provides an important countervoice to an otherwise majority white class attempting to think critically about whiteness. Not only have most of the white students not thought critically about whiteness, but they have not engaged in critical discussions about race more generally, and certainly not with blacks and other nonwhites or with a teacher/professor who is black. hooks pulls from her personal pedagogical experience to demonstrate how the black gaze might mediate white students’ responses. She writes:

In these classrooms there have been heated debates among students when white students respond with disbelief, shock, and rage, as they listen to black students talk about whiteness, when they are compelled to hear observations, stereotypes, etc., that are offered as “data” gleaned from close scrutiny and study. Usually, white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where “whiteness” is the privileged signifier.⁷⁷

At one level, I think that white students react this way because of their belief in meritocracy and the assumption that they are just like black people when it comes to chances for success, when dealing with police officers or when out shopping. Indeed, many white students, from my own experience, seem to think that racism exists because *we* (black people) will not let go of the past. If blacks would only let go of the past then they would see that racism no longer exists except perhaps as a rare aberration. hooks suggests that white students' "rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear."⁷⁸

Yet, perhaps more is at stake. At the beginning of semester, I enter introduction to philosophy classrooms filled with white faces. Many students may wonder just who this guy is who is about to teach *us* about one of the most elitist and whitest of subjects—philosophy. After all, most of them have only had white teachers/professors previously. And while most of them can only name a handful of white male Western philosophers, the idea of a black philosopher is just too hard to wrap their minds around. Within the framework of their limited experiences, they have not witnessed blacks engage the likes of Plato or Descartes. Indeed, they may not have had any contact with blacks in positions of responsibility and authority. I recall one black female student who struggled, fearing that she would bring undue attention to me, to articulate before the entire class just how happy and proud she was that she was sitting in a class with and learning from a *black* professor who teaches philosophy. Imagine a white student saying this to a *white* male professor in the philosophy department.

Nevertheless, as I enter these spaces, I wonder if my white colleagues feel students' looks of surprise, maybe even doubt: "Perhaps he got the rooms mixed up." There is a deeper racist narrative that undergirds these looks, even if my students are unaware of the origins of these racist narratives. There is the unstated assumption that the black is not intellectually competent. And when it comes to talking about whiteness (*their* whiteness), "many of them are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful."⁷⁹ As hooks notes, though, for years black people, "acting as informants, brought knowledge back to segregated communities—details, facts, observations, and psychoanalytic readings of the white Other."⁸⁰ Imagine the difficulty of not only cutting through their assumptions about black bodies, and *black male bodies* in particular, but think of how they initially react to the presence of a black body talking to them about whiteness as a form of power, privilege, and historical terror, particularly as they want so much to deny that history (let alone its contemporary manifestations) and to blame those who were victims of that history, those who look like me. And while I am the object of their gaze, and perhaps even their amusement, I bring a countergaze, a demanding gaze, an inviting gaze, an understanding gaze. It is a gaze that encourages them to travel, to move into a space of uncertainty, to crack just a little bit, to rename familiar experiences, to dialogue, to transgress, to show trust, a form of "trust [that] is obviously absent in the antidialogics of the banking method of education."⁸¹ If I am successful, my

students come to value a form of double-consciousness, one that militates against silence and encourages efforts at embodying the fruits of “action-reflection.”⁸²

When my white students show no interest (and perhaps even refuse) to explore whiteness, its historical construction, its myth-making around origins, its power, hegemony, and privilege, I convey to them that they have decided to settle for less, that they have decided to remain unfinished as human beings. In fact, if *I* refuse to develop a critical consciousness regarding sexism, patriarchy, and problematic social and historical constructions of masculinity, then I also fail to explore ways in which *I* might become more, ways in which *I* might unbecome. *I* must make sexism and patriarchy (and other normative practices that privilege me) an object of *my* cognition. This is something that I openly share with my students. Why should they only confess? As hooks notes, “When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess.”⁸³ As a way of getting students to express levels of vulnerability, teachers/professors must also disengage the façade that we have no history and that problematic historical practices are not indeed in us. hooks continues, “When professors bring narratives of their experiences into the classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators.”⁸⁴ I too must develop “conscientization” (Freire’s term for critical awareness). As Freire argues, “Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity.”⁸⁵ As an expression of hegemony, oppression, and exclusive transcendence, whiteness, on this score, thwarts the expression of human potential. When whites refuse to interrogate whiteness as expressed institutionally or through their own habits of being, they remain static. When white philosophers speak as all-knowing voices that exclude and relegate to silence and insignificance non-Anglo/non-European philosophical voices, they exemplify misanthropy. As Freire notes:

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere “its” in whom I cannot recognize other “I’s”? How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of “pure” men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are “these people” or “the great unwashed”?⁸⁶

And when white teachers/professors engage white students in African American literature courses, for example, without encouraging their white students to question how such literature speaks to their own whiteness, then whiteness remains sustained as silent background. This silence evades important ways in which African American literature critically engages whiteness and how it shifts attention toward intratextual and extratextual white racist practices. Hence, white students approach African American literature as “different” and exotic, while this colonizing hermeneutic approach secures white identity and shifts white students away from the important work of self-examination. White teachers/professors who are guilty of this silence around whiteness, and how African American writers telescope whiteness within the purview of their critical subjectivity, contribute toward maintaining the status quo, fail to transgress, fail to engage in practices of freedom, and “fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings.”⁸⁷ According to Michael Apple, “What

counts as ‘official knowledge’ consistently bears the imprint of tensions, struggles, and compromises in which race plays a substantial role.”⁸⁸ To recognize that one’s disciplinary legitimating practices, and one’s style of pedagogical engagement, are fueled by racial and cultural hubris and hegemony is threatening. This leaves one vulnerable not only to the charge of lacking self-critical engagement, but possibly vulnerable to the more toxic charge of ideological obfuscation with intent.

hooks is cognizant of how easy it is to elide important discussions around race and racism, how, in this case, *white students* resist shifting ways of engaging ideas and how they attempt to reinscribe the status quo. She provides an example involving African American women’s literature. hooks is aware that her white students hold varied political postures. “Yet,” she notes, “they come into a class on African American women’s literature expecting to hear no discussion of the politics of race, class, and gender.”⁸⁹ The implication is that in other literature classes, classes where white male literati “played in the dark,” whiteness remained the unnamed, the unmarked, the transcendental norm. hooks continues:

Often these students will complain, “Well I thought this was a literature class.” What they’re really saying to me is, “I thought this class was going to be taught like any other literature class I would take, only we would now substitute black female writers for white male writers.” They accept the shift in the locus of representation but resist shifting ways they think about ideas.⁹⁰

Shifting the locus of representation without changing the ways in which students engage ideas only reinscribes unexamined normative assumptions and reinforces intellectual rigidity. For example, to teach a course in Africana philosophy, it is not enough to substitute black philosophers for Anglo-American and European philosophers. Rather, it is important that students comprehend and appreciate the ways in which Africana philosophy, which, in many ways, functions as a *resistant* disciplinary matrix, interrogates the *raced* epistemological, ethical, and sociopolitical assumptions embedded in Anglo American and European *Weltanschauungen*. In this way, ideas are engaged (not flattened). Students begin to interrogate ideas, to shift how they think about ideas, through an appreciation of how ideas get reconfigured and rethought within the framework that *standpoint* is important in terms of how ideas are approached, valued, and theorized.

hooks knows the importance of creating and using space creatively. During those times that I spend with my students, I attempt to create a space within which they might be, as Pema Chodron metaphorically says, *pushed over the cliff*. hooks feels deep kinship with this insightful metaphor as she “sought teachers in all areas of [her] life who would challenge [her] beyond what [she] might select for [herself], and in and through that challenge allow [her] a space of radical openness where [she] is truly free to choose—able to learn and grow without limits.”⁹¹ Through my pedagogical practices, through words and deeds, theory and practice, I invite my students to take a collective leap, one informed by a passionate and critical drive to push the limits of *what* they know and *how* they come to know what they know. It is a space where the conscious self must be fully present, ever watchful, ever self-reflexive—to the extent to which that is possible—and where the “unconscious,”

that “Other” to the self, that stranger within, is challenged and becomes better known. This space is *welcoming*. “Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.”⁹²

Notes

1. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.
2. Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 224.
3. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 192.
4. *Ibid.*, 191.
5. *Ibid.*, 16.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 219. My emphasis.
9. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 15–16.
10. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
11. *Ibid.*, 145.
12. *Ibid.*, 194.
13. *Ibid.*, 195.
14. *Ibid.*, 195.
15. *Ibid.*, 14.
16. *Ibid.*, 16.
17. *Ibid.*, 17.
18. *Ibid.*, 17.
19. *Ibid.*, 13.
20. *Ibid.*, 92.
21. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 5.
22. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 186.
23. *Ibid.*, 149.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 153.
28. *Ibid.*, 153.
29. *Ibid.*, 187.
30. *Ibid.*, 19.
31. *Ibid.*, 198.
32. *Ibid.*, 199.
33. *Ibid.*, 198.
34. Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 6.
35. *Ibid.*
36. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 5.
37. *Ibid.*, 202.
38. Ann Berlak, “Challenging the Hegemony of Whiteness by Addressing the Adaptive Unconscious,” in *Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom: Critical Educational Teaching Approaches for Social Justice Activism*, ed. Virginia Lea and Erma Jean Sims (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 54.
39. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 51.
40. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 203 (my emphasis).

41. Ibid. (my emphasis).
42. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81.
43. Ibid.
44. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 18.
45. Ibid., 14.
46. Ibid., 46.
47. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 73.
48. Ibid., 72.
49. My point here is to suggest ways in which the sensibilities embedded within the baking system of education actually function to render whites passive with respect to rendering problematic their whiteness.
50. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.
51. Ibid., 83.
52. Ibid., 84.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 83.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Berlak, "Challenging the Hegemony of Whiteness," 59.
58. Ibid.
59. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 92.
60. Ibid., 81.
61. Ibid., 88.
62. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 39.
63. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 90.
64. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 202.
65. Ibid., 67.
66. Ibid., 59.
67. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 84.
68. Ibid..
69. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to The Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. with an Introduction and Notes Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 167.
70. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 167.
71. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through the Work in Women's Studies," in *Critical Whiteness Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 291
72. Ibid. 291
73. Ibid. 292.
74. Nelson M. Rodriguez, "Emptying the Content of Whiteness: Toward an Understanding of the Relation between Whiteness and Pedagogy," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson, M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 45.
75. Frances K. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41.
76. Of course, being black does not mean ipso facto that one has not internalized ways of thinking and being that reflect white approved ways of thinking and being.
77. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 167.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 167–68.
80. Ibid., 165.
81. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 91.
82. Ibid., 88.

83. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.
84. Ibid.
85. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 84.
86. Ibid., 90.
87. Ibid., 84.
88. Michael Apple, "Foreword," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson, M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), xii.
89. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 144.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 207.
92. hooks, *Yearning*, 152.

3

Teaching to Transgress

Deconstructing Normalcy and Resignifying the Marked Body

CINDY LACOM AND SUSAN HADLEY

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes, “The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies.”¹ hooks’s focus on embodiment and how it can “deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated”² compels us to contemplate the ways in which paradigms of power and dominance are both maintained and challenged in society and more particularly in our classrooms. Important aspects of her liberatory and transformative pedagogy include the interrogation of identity categories, calling into question essentialist politics while considering the importance of “experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory.”³ As part of this project, hooks discusses the need for students and professors to regard each other as “whole” human beings, and though hooks never suggests that this offers a universal answer to the problems of sexism, racism, and classism, she does suggest that the classroom is a critical space for the deconstruction of hegemonic practices which reinforce and sustain practices of domination.

hooks argues persuasively that “Only when we confront the realities of sex, race, and class, the ways they divide us, make us different, stand us in opposition, and work to reconcile and resolve these issues will we be able to participate in the... transformation of the world.”⁴ She also acknowledges that such confrontations, while necessary, can be messy, uncomfortable, and even hostile. It is easy for white students and teachers to understand their whiteness as unmarked and neutral and, by extension, to take for granted the privileges conferred upon them by their whiteness in a racist society. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray note, historically (in literature and in western society generally) “whiteness [has served] as a sort of invisible norm, the unraced center of a racialized world. Whiteness is different from blackness... in that it has long held the privileged place of racial normativity.”⁵ One challenge, then, especially at predominantly white, homogenous colleges and universities, is to deconstruct the normative while considering the ways in which bodies are ideologically marked, the ways in which all bodies are cultural signifiers with deep historical, social, and political contexts.

Like many faculty across the country, we teach at a university whose population is overwhelmingly white, working class, and conservative. Many of our students have never interacted with a person of color or a person from another country until they arrive at our campus—and even then such interactions are often limited and grudging. In other words, many of our students bring with them to campus racist, sexist, and ableist perspectives. As race and postcolonial theorists like Anthony Appiah (in his article, “Race”), Frantz Fanon (in *Wretched of the Earth*), and Gayatri Spivak (most famously in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) argue, those in positions of power rarely sacrifice that power willingly. One step toward an acknowledgment of that power is to recognize and articulate its sources. This means that conversations about embodiment, identity, and power compel many in our classrooms to first consider and then destabilize those very categories which seem “naturally” to situate those who are white so comfortably in positions of relative cultural authority.

In this chapter, we will cite personal examples from our teaching with the aim of illustrating the points that we are making. In order to do this, we will indicate which of us is writing at the beginning of the relevant paragraph. While we teach different subject matter (Cindy teaches in the English department and Sue teaches music therapy), there are many aspects of our teaching that have similarities.

As white women initiating conversations about embodiment, it is critical for us to consider as part of our praxis our own subject position in the classroom and in society. As hooks notes, “When we write about [or teach about] the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination.”⁶ We believe that it is both important and useful to address frankly the ways in which our own identity categories (which of course are neither uniform nor stable) confer privilege and power upon us, especially in our role as white university professors and especially in the classroom. Taking such steps is useful for a variety of reasons: because hooks is right that concerns about appropriation and tokenism are valid and need to be addressed, but also because it can model for students a critique and a making visible of our own embodiment and the various cultural benefits (or costs) which might be affiliated with that embodiment.

In “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” hooks cites Pratibha Parmar: “The appropriation and use of space are political acts.”⁷ We agree, and we think as teachers we need to recognize this in the classroom and to be honest about our own identity categories, about the standpoint(s) from which we participate in dialogues about embodiment. To that end, we need to name ourselves as white women (and to complicate that identity category, to negate the idea of its neutrality) *and* as teachers, because even in a student-centered, liberatory classroom, our role grants us at least a modicum of power which our students typically do not have.

Cindy: *One way that we analyze the intersections of power and space in our classroom (often on the first day of class) is to consider the physical setup of most classrooms (with the teacher at the front and students arranged in symmetrical rows) and the ways in which such a setup constructs power in particular ways. When I ask why none of the students sat at “my” desk on day one, they usually reply with slightly uncomfortable*

laughter. But the fact that no student ever has assumed that “position of power” is noteworthy. I often introduce Foucault’s ideas of the panopticon with a handout and a brief overview to complicate our analysis of power and space. We consider how the typical position of the teacher in the classroom also gives her the power of surveillance (a power which can “produce” docile bodies more easily) which is denied to our students, so jammed into their tight, uncomfortable desks that they are barely able to move, much less look around with any degree of ease or authority. Thus, from the start of the semester, we begin to consider how differences—in terms of space (where we sit or stand), in terms of age (I am usually older than my students), in terms of address (though I ask students to call me by my first name and explain that I do so in order to deconstruct the power hierarchy constituted via the discursive practice of using titles versus first names, many are deeply uncomfortable at first about doing so and thus I receive innumerable e-mails which address me simply with “Hello”)—all differences which are typically marked and visible and which contribute to hierarchies and to ideological understandings of one’s “place.”

Sue: When I first meet with a class I immediately ask them to move their seats into a circle. They then move their chairs into a slight curve (in order to keep the “teacher” space separate) until I insist that they close the circle. After they have done this I ask them to think about why it is that I have all of my classes sit in a circle and how this differs from the setup that they usually have in classrooms. Some students suggest that I do this because it simulates a therapy group and they are learning to be therapists. We spend time discussing the advantages of sitting in a circle—to have a seamless flow between all members of the classroom, to encourage greater interaction between all members, and to lessen the teacher–student hierarchy. I then introduce ideas from feminism and we talk about how each of us has a unique perspective and that each has something to teach the group and to learn from the group. I stress that it is by incorporating different perspectives that we will all gain greater insights into the subject matter we are studying. Interestingly, it takes several weeks of reinforcement before they will come in and arrange the chairs without prompting.

Though these are indeed mild strategies by which to introduce issues of difference, efforts to confront difference in the classroom in more critical ways often spark resistance or, conversely, force the one or two students of color in our classrooms to “assume the role of ‘native informant’”⁸ or the “expert” on the category of Otherness under discussion. The question of how to nurture an environment where “difference [can] be acknowledged”⁹ and respected in a classroom where there is often deep resistance to such difference poses a particular challenge.

Cindy: I have found that one way to “unpack” such differences in a nonthreatening way is to begin our interrogation by means of a Disability Studies perspective. In essence, I am arguing that once we have considered historical, economic, and cultural processes by which people with disabilities are stigmatized, it is less threatening to consider the ways in which race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and religion might “mark” bodies in particular ways. As hooks puts it, “Once we start talking in the classroom about the body and how we live in our bodies, we’re automatically challenging

the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space.”¹⁰ While this chapter is an important start, I believe that more work needs to be done exploring the importance of hooks’s theorizations concerning hegemonic epistemologies, ways of knowing, ways of seeing, and ways of being embodied vis-à-vis the praxis and theory oriented area of Disability Studies, particularly in terms of its importance in terms of generating critical knowledge production in both the classroom and within larger spaces of social transaction.

Sue: *Given that I am working with students who are becoming therapists, it is very important to help students become aware that they may be adding to rather than diminishing the pathologization of “deviant” bodies. As Jennifer Adrienne states, “The construction of assessments, goals, objectives, evaluations, clinical notes and insurance diagnoses, are all how we socially create what is necessary in order to legitimate our profession and to legitimate the need for our job.”¹¹ Therefore, it is very important for students to be aware of their tendency to construct people with disabilities as the negative other. One music therapy student coming to awareness about the perception of sick and healthy bodies wrote, “To what extent does the healthy person view the patient with cancer as being synonymous with their dying body? Do we put the entire person in the ‘sick category’ so as to avoid actual connection with this person who somehow ‘no longer exists’ because his/her body no longer exists in the form it once did? Are sick/dying people only bodies because we do not want to acknowledge our own vulnerability and the reality of our own mortality?” She then went on to relate this to her experiences with an eating disorder and her reduction by others. She wrote, “I was somehow no longer the same person as before. Instead, I was only a thin body.”*

Because white students and faculty so often do not understand their own whiteness as unmarked, we often underestimate (or deny outright) the stigmatization of bodies, especially marginalized bodies. It is imperative, then, to begin by contemplating the ways in which “The process of stigmatization thus legitimates the status quo, naturalizes attributes of inherent inferiority and superiority, and obscures the socially constructed quality of both categories,” as Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes.¹² Disability Studies begins with the assumption that bodies always do important cultural work (see Simi Linton, Garland Thomson, Mitchell and Snyder, Robert McGruer, Michael Davidson, Tobin Siebers), and by integrating texts which address disability into our classrooms, we are often able to open up a dialogue in which students recognize that people with disabilities (PWDs) in fact have been and still are stigmatized in a variety of ways. For instance, reading Nancy Mairs’ “On Being a Cripple” invites conversation about how a disease like multiple sclerosis and its physical “markers” have cultural ramifications tied to American values of independence, a strong work ethic, mobility, and physical attractiveness. Many of our students who might have before insisted that markers of difference are no longer a “big deal” suddenly are writing about the prejudice faced by their father who has MS or about the blow to masculine self-esteem experienced when their grandfather lost an arm in an industrial accident and was subsequently unemployed and on welfare. And, reading Adrienne Asch’s “Critical Race Theory, Feminism, and Disability: Reflections on Social Justice and Personal Identity”¹³ leads students to

begin to explore the many ways that environments privilege certain types of bodies over others and how these environments were shaped by those in power.

Cindy: *One student wrote an essay in which she analyzed her childhood fears of a neighbor with a facial disfigurement, reading those fears dialogically with fairy tales and Disney movies which align physical “deviance” with moral deviance (think of characters as varied as Captain Hook, Richard III, the Phantom of the Opera, Captain Ahab, or the witch in “Hansel and Gretel”). She was amazed to discover that by the time she was six or seven, she had internalized an array of cultural biases which denigrate disability so fully that they had come to seem “natural.” Such epiphanies are often radically transformative. But because the roots of ableism (like the roots of racism) run so deep, it’s important to further complicate our analyses with readings and discussions of the historical roots of ableist attitudes.*

Sue: *I often share with students some of my own experiences and “mistakes” I have made. I explain to them that through my own enculturation process, I came to adopt oppressive social practices that were invisible to me. While I have several different types of examples of how this has manifested itself, one example involves the way that I see the physical layout of the world and my assumption that how I see it is how it actually is. I tell them that one day I was helping a friend rearrange her bedroom in order to maximize the small space she had. I found a perfect solution and began to assert my viewpoint. When she looked at me and asked me how she would get her clothes out or how she would get into her bed, I replied that it was easy and proceeded to show her. As she looked at me and shook her head in tolerant amusement, the ignorance of my suggestion became embarrassingly clear. I had not taken into consideration that her wheelchair would not fit into the tight space that my upright ambulatory body did!*

By openly discussing examples of how I have overlooked ways in which my body is privileged over other bodies, I hope to foster an environment of safety in which my students, too, can explore ways in which their bodies have been privileged and oppressed due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, age, ablebodiedness, ethnicity, or religion.

In *Ain’t I a Woman?* hooks asks a critical question: “For how does one overthrow, change, or even challenge a system that you have been taught to admire, to love, to believe in?”¹⁴ In other words, how do we step outside our ideological framework enough to perceive the shape and substance of that framework, much less critique it? This is of course a question which has plagued cultural theorists, and especially Marxian and Althusserian theorists, for generations.

Cindy: *I do not pretend to have the answer, but in my classes, we read from Michael Oliver’s *The Politics of Disablement* to understand how industrialization and an increased emphasis on time-keeping in the nineteenth century marginalized and continues to marginalize PWDs. In discussions about the debate behind FDR’s statue in Washington, DC (whether to portray him standing independently or in his chair), we contemplate the ways in which an American valuation of independence constructs the needs of many PWDs as “weakness.” We consider the ways in which disability,*

currently understood within a medical paradigm, reinforce our cultural privileging of science and support a eugenicist impulse in much of modern medicine. We discuss the ideological distinctions between physical and mental disabilities and the prevalent cultural attitude that mental health disorders are the consequence of character faults or a failure of will power. During such discussions, many of us in the classroom share “aha!” moments where we recognize in lived, immediate ways that “deviant” bodies are pathologized in troubling and deeply complicated ways in our society.

One pedagogical practice that I have used in College Writing courses which illuminates in profound (if disturbing) ways the deep cultural stigmas attached to (culturally perceived) disabilities is to place posters, which have different descriptors, on different sections of the wall on the day we are to discuss Mairs’s essay: multiple sclerosis, developmental disability, deafness, blindness, paralysis, and dead. Before we begin discussing the reading, I ask students to stand under the poster which designates their choice if they had to make one. Every fall, I am astonished by how many line up under “dead.” We then embark on a discussion (often personal, often passionate) about why students might have chosen the “disability” that they did—and also why some might prefer to be dead rather than, say, blind—and along the way, begin considering how deeply our ideas of “independence,” “mobility,” or “productivity” are culturally constructed. On many occasions, for example, students have chosen to have deafness or a developmental disability because they are not necessarily visible. We then discuss the implications of such a choice, and the specular nature of “disability” as it is defined in Western societies.

Although “difference” is not always visually marked, it usually is, which is why hooks’s reminder is so incredibly significant: you’ve got to “remember yourself—because to remember yourself is to see yourself always as a body in a system.”¹⁵

Sue: *A student stated one day that her difference was not usually visually marked—she has a congenital bladder defect. However, what became infuriating to her was that the same symptoms experienced by someone without this disability are viewed very differently. That is, if one of her roommates drinks too much and accidentally wets her bed, everyone finds this hilarious, but if she accidentally wets her bed due to her bladder condition, this is something to be ashamed about.*

While embodiment matters, it can also lead to absolutist or definitive renderings of identity categories (“He’s the crippled guy”; “That’s the black kid in the corner”; “Kim’s the dyke”). In much of her work, hooks examines the thorny problems of essentialism. She generally celebrates the ways in which “critiques of essentialism have usefully deconstructed the idea of a monolithic homogenous black identity and experience,”¹⁶ but she adds in “Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical Intervention” that “this critique should not become a means to dismiss differences or an excuse for ignoring the authority of experience.”¹⁷ Many students (actually, many of us generally) are uncomfortable with the idea that something as seemingly stable as our “identity” is in fact unstable, subject to re/vision. hooks’s clear connection of “the will to know with the will to become” suggests to us one way

to consider how identity categories are (or can be) liminal, how no single identity category can “essentially” explain anyone in the classroom (or beyond).

Cindy: *One way I do this in our discussions of embodiment via readings in Disability Studies is to talk about my own embodiment—not just as a white woman and a professor but as a person with Crohn’s disease and a demyelinating disorder. The liminality of those identity categories is sometimes illustrated in very real, lived ways, when I experience an exacerbation and become ill or have to use a cane. I might discuss the experience, for instance, of being considered “able-bodied” in a visual society where I “look” okay despite having lost ten pounds and having become anemic in two weeks due to a flare-up of my Crohn’s, while the use of a cane if my legs become weak during an exacerbation of my demyelinating disorder marks me as “being sick.” I also discuss the ways in which a Crohn’s flare-up can be more difficult and daunting than a neurological flare-up. Many of my students can relate to this in a variety of ways: some have broken legs and realized only then how unaccommodating most public places are to those with mobility challenges, while others have experienced gut-wrenching frustration when society has minimized or marginalized the invisible disabilities or diseases of friends or family members.*

Many years ago, one student asked, “Why isn’t mean-spiritedness or racism considered a disability? What about hatred?” After years of reading deeply in both liberatory pedagogy and Disability Studies, I was abashed to realize that he had asked a question that I’d not considered before with such clarity. I have since incorporated it into class discussions, because it gets directly at issues of embodiment and the ways in which bodies are culturally marked, at the ways in which the exteriority of bodies often seems to matter more fully than character, aesthetics, generosity, or kindness, for instance.

In addition to focusing on how our bodies are culturally marked, we also place great emphasis on how our bodies are marked by our gender. Like hooks, we are committed to feminist education in order to develop our students’ critical consciousness. Many of our students are very resistant to feminism and at first are not able to see how they have been oppressed by patriarchy. “Mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men.”¹⁸ If asked how many of them believe that all people should receive equal pay for the same work, all of them raise their hands. When asked how many of them believe that hurting someone you love doesn’t make sense, all of them raise their hands. However, when asked how many of them would define themselves as feminists, only a couple at most will raise their hands. This leads to discussions about the negative connotations attached to the word *feminism* and why that might be. Sometimes, simply starting by talking about the difference between the terms *slut* and *stud* in our perceptions of women and men, can be very effective. We point out that a woman doesn’t go up to another woman and say as a compliment, “You are such a slut!” While it is amusing and always gets a laugh, it opens up a much more serious space to consider the sexual double standards that are still so prevalent in our society and the ways in which this is represented in part in our interpretations of bodies in gendered ways. These double standards are also highlighted in discussions about the candidates in the

2008 democratic primaries. In fact, much of the commentary on Hillary Clinton has been coded in terms of her gendered body (e.g., her crying and its impact on female voters), as much of the commentary on Barack Obama has been coded in terms of his raced body (e.g., the depiction of him as articulate and bright and clean). While many of our class conversations begin on a light note, often students begin to feel vulnerable as their long held assumptions are shaken.

In writing about an increasing focus on cultural diversity at the university, hooks notes that such a focus has also meant that “The idea that the classroom should always be a ‘safe,’ harmonious place was challenged.”¹⁹ We agree with hooks that it is pedagogically imperative for us as teachers and learners in our classrooms to be vulnerable, to not just confront but incite discomfort, to critically examine intersections of power, embodiment, knowledge, and in doing so, to wed “the will to know with the will to become.”²⁰ But we also believe that a pedagogy which risks discomfort, even anguish, can also benefit from strategies which defuse (but never diminish) those risks.

A Disability Studies approach to those aforementioned intersections can do this and can also create a space for classroom conversations not only about cultural stigmatizations of different kinds of embodiment but also, and more importantly, about why such stigmatizations *matter*. Another approach is to adopt a narrative perspective and to talk about ways in which we interpret experiences through narratives, stringing together meaningful events. Narratives about ourselves, others, or societies get influenced by the broader narratives from our cultural context. Some narratives can affirm our identities and others can denigrate them. A narrative understanding of the self presupposes that identities are not fixed and are shaped by historical and lived contexts.

Sue: *It is fairly easy for music therapy students to come to see how a person with a disability is reduced to a thin description, a restrictive narrative that defines the person in terms of what they are not able to do. The next step is for them to see how people in other groups that have been oppressed historically are also reduced to thin descriptions, descriptions that are restrictive in terms of the ways we understand them. As such, as soon as we see another body we are interpreting them through dominant stories that we have learned from a very young age.*

To acknowledge that bodies have a concrete, historical, and lived context which cannot be dismissed or denied is an important first step in a transformative pedagogy, and having taken it, we can then more easily deconstruct the ways in which embodiment contributes to paradigms of power which are the products of a host of ideological state apparatuses, in Althusserian terms. In *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, Susan Wendell discusses the “disciplines of normality” which combine to create simultaneously ideas of what constitutes “normality” and what constitutes “deviance,” arguing that “In a society that idealizes the body, people who cannot come close enough to the ideals, and those whose bodies are out of control, become devalued people because of their devalued bodies.”²¹ In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis explores in great depth the historical development of a shared cultural concept of “normal.” From a structuralist perspective, we

can consider how the concept of “able bodied” (or “white” or “man”) relies upon its binary opposite (“disabled,” “black,” “woman”) to accrue meaning. But from a poststructuralist perspective, we can begin to call into question those seemingly stable binaries. When asked the question which matters most, her being black or her being a woman, hooks draws attention to the flawed disjunction vis-à-vis questions of identity. She notes, “All such questions are rooted in competitive either/or thinking, the belief that the self is formed in opposition to an other.... Most people are socialized to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility.”²²

Cindy: *Like hooks, I adopt a poststructuralist approach to understanding embodiment and identity, because oppositional/structuralist thinking is too often ultimately essentialist.*

Once we have agreed that bodies are culturally marked, we can turn to a broad array of texts—music lyrics, television shows, films, YouTube, Facebook, global wars, magazine articles, textbooks, the practice of surveillance to create “docile” bodies—which open doors for us to complicate our discussions of how domination and colonization of people who are disempowered occurs, to enrich our consideration of how power is maintained and reinforced—and also to contemplate how those structures and institutions might be challenged, re/visioned, or undermined. And this is truly exciting, because I agree with hooks that “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”²³

One way in which the classroom has been a radical space of possibility for hooks, as we have stated above, has been in terms of explorations of whiteness. Class discussions have explored the ways in which “the absence of recognition [of whiteness] is a strategy that facilitates making a group the Other.”²⁴ She has found that when black students talk about whiteness and “critically assess white people from a standpoint where ‘whiteness’ is the privileged signifier,” white students are amazed “that black people watch white people with a critical ‘ethnographic’ gaze.”²⁵ She states that this naïve amazement is itself “an expression of racism.”²⁶ hooks goes on to state that:

Socialized to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening, many white people assume this is the way black people conceptualize whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness.²⁷

Whether one has white and black students in a classroom, a mixture of racial groups, or white students only, whiteness is something that must be explored for radical transformation to take place.

Sue: *Whiteness is often invisible to my students who are predominantly white, yet other races are hypervisible. I feel that by critically examining whiteness, it makes issues related to multiculturalism less about “them.” It puts the onus more on the students to think about the ways in which their whiteness influences every aspect of their being.*

After exploring many of these issues, one student wrote, “Although my awareness has been increased, I must say that I often still do not view myself as privileged. In the same way, I still do not view myself as racist although I am. I realize that as a white person I do not view myself as raced. I realize that I view myself as the norm and view others as outside the norm. It is difficult to admit that I am racist. It is difficult to accept that I have earned things in my life through no merit of my own. It is difficult to accept stories of oppression from other races because of the implications to myself. If their experience of racism on a daily basis is true, what does that say about me? What does it say of my character as a good, responsible, respectable and deserving white person? It destroys it. It is so much easier to deny its existence and sweep it under the carpet. It is the denial surrounding these issues that empowers them. I believe that as we recognize and give voice to that which is silent and face our fears, we can begin to move forward.”

In “Choosing the Margin,” hooks shares Homi Bhabha’s concept of unhomeliness when she writes:

... the very meaning of “home” changes with experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.²⁸

If “home” is a place which is (or can be) uncertain, if “home” can represent the unknown, the alien, this can throw us into a kind of existential terror. But it can also invite us into a space wherein cultural concepts of “normalcy” have lost their mooring, where hierarchies based upon embodiment (race, disability, age, geography) are no longer writ in stone but are subject to challenge. Teasing apart (but never fully answering) the riddle of how to balance identity categories which help us understand and make meaning in the world with essentialist notions of selfhood (or Otherhood) which can be damaging or demeaning—such projects can become shared explorations of borderlands which we cross, where we meet (and sometimes clash with) others.

Cindy: *I often teach Gloria Anzaldua’s poem, “Borderlands” as a transition piece from Disability Studies to Race Studies in my classes. In the poem, Anzaldua explores the experience of living on numerous borders: gendered, racial, ethnic, linguistic. While recognizing the challenges of living in las fronteras, she also celebrates the potential for change which occurs in that space. And if, at the beginning of the term, white students might well have believed that they do not—cannot—inhabit borders (because they assume that they live at the center), they often find themselves realizing that in fact they do, that their own subject positions are not fixed, that their ideas of “normalcy” have undergone and are undergoing alteration. They may not inhabit the same borders as a Latina or a black woman (though sometimes they might), but they recognize that*

“difference” often coincides with the known, that the boundaries between “normal” and “deviant” can be paper-thin, subject to collapse.

hooks recognizes that “It is fashionable these days...to talk about ‘hybridity’ and ‘border crossing,’ but we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern.”²⁹ A Disability Studies perspective offers one very rich and provocative means by which to consider “concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures,” but another specific way that we sometimes get at this is via discussions about class, because so many of our students come from working-class backgrounds. As hooks notes, “Class antagonism can be constructively used, not made to reinforce the notion that students and professors from working-class backgrounds are ‘outsiders’ and ‘interlopers,’ but to subvert and challenge the existing structure.”³⁰ Many of our students, despite their conservatism, grew up in homes where the support of unions is so central that it is taken for granted, where parents got “screwed” when they were laid off of jobs or lost pensions, and where they consequently understand in concrete ways that the myth that hard work always pays off is just that: a myth. Thus, considerations of class and of students’ lived experiences can provide another bridge to considerations of race and gender in our enquiry into embodiment, power, and privilege.

Cindy: *When hooks writes, “Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory,”³¹ I find myself replying almost out loud, “Yes!” I agree with her that what we teach is usually less important than how we teach—that “a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the curriculum.”³² I also believe that this is not an easy line to draw. I remember in one graduate course years ago that I taught called *Discourses of Disability*, one of my students exclaimed after reading a selection from Erving Goffman’s *Stigma*, “You know, really, we ALL have disabilities when you think about it.” That’s a bit like saying that we’re all a little bit black (or queer, or colonized, or subaltern, or female), and such a claim illustrates what happens when an identity category becomes so broad, so porous that it becomes meaningless. It is also an example of what happens when people in positions of potential power co-opt the lived experiences of marginalized groups to recolonize them subjectively. Though initially taken aback by this student’s comment, it ultimately became another way to ground theory in practice and to consider what we risk when we diminish difference in our shared project of resignifying embodiment.*

Like hooks, we believe that theory is—has to be—a social practice, and that the goal of becoming “critical thinkers”³³ has to remain one of our most central aims as teachers, students, scholars, and especially as we strive to become whole human beings. We also agree with hooks that “There is not much passionate teaching or learning taking place in higher education today.”³⁴ However, conversations about teaching are imperative in fostering and reigniting a passion for learning, teaching,

and the transformation of our worlds. We recognize and accept that there is “no speaking about power in a way that remains critically anterior to it,”³⁵ but we agree with hooks that we must struggle to articulate the positions from which we speak, to value and integrate our lived experiences in conceptions of “knowledge,” and to transgress and resignify the ways in which we understand normalcy. She writes, “Acknowledging that we are bodies in the classroom has been important to me, especially in my efforts to disrupt the notion of professor as omnipotent, all-knowing mind.”³⁶ Consciousness of our own embodiment has been and remains important to us as well, not only because it disrupts traditional concepts of power within the classroom, but also because of its potential to disrupt concepts of power beyond the classroom. And that can truly be transformative.

Notes

1. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), 139.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 90.
4. hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press), 1989, 25.
5. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, Introduction, in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), 3.
6. hooks, *Talking Back*, 43.
7. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 152.
8. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 43.
9. Ibid., 30.
10. Ibid., 136–37.
11. Jennifer Adrienne, “A Feminist Sociology of Professional Issues in Music Therapy,” in *Feminist Perspectives in Music Therapy*, ed. Susan Hadley (Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 2006), 47.
12. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 31.
13. Adrienne Asch, “Critical Race Theory, Feminism, and Disability: Reflections on Social Justice and Personal Identity,” in *Gendering Disability*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press), 2004.
14. hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), 121.
15. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 135.
16. Ibid., 78.
17. hooks, *Yearning*, 130.
18. hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), vii–viii.
19. Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 30.
20. Ibid., 19.
21. Susan Wendell. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York; London: Routledge, 1996), 89, 91.
22. hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 29.
23. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 12.
24. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 167.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 169.
28. hooks, *Yearning*, 148.

29. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 129–30.
30. Ibid., 183.
31. Ibid., 90.
32. Ibid., 148.
33. Ibid., 5.
34. Ibid., 199.
35. Mike Hill, “Can Whiteness Speak? Institutional Anomalies, Ontological Disasters, and Three Hollywood Films,” in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), 158.
36. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 138.

4

bell hooks, White Supremacy, and the Academy

TIM DAVIDSON AND JEANETTE R. DAVIDSON

Introduction

The term *white supremacy* is provocative and brutal, conjuring images of a colonial, imperialist past of genocide, slavery, and segregation or of closed-minded, racist, militant hate-mongers in the present era. Many writers of critical race theory modify the rhetoric, referring to white privilege and institutionalized racism or distinguishing between covert and overt acts of racism and describing prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. bell hooks says *white supremacy* is “the most useful term” to express, for her, the ongoing “exploitation of black people and other people of color in this society.”¹ In the academy and other areas of intellectual life, hooks says the term *white supremacy* became not only useful, but “necessary” to clarify the central thrust of her work on racism as distinguished from the work of white feminists who “wished to exercise control over [black feminists’] bodies and thoughts as their racist ancestors had” and “fellow white English professors who want very much to have ‘a’ black person in ‘their’ department, as long as that person acts and thinks like them.”²

Rather than opting for more conciliatory language that might miss the point of racism as nefarious, global, systemic, and constant—not easily dismantled simply because a few good white people want racist thoughts and actions to go away on convenient terms—hooks insists on identifying the functional structure of racism. hooks poses a very significant question. She asks, “Why is it so difficult for many white folks to understand that racism is oppressive not because white folks have prejudicial feelings about blacks (they could have such feelings and leave us alone) but because it is a system that promotes domination and subjugation?”³

Commentators on hooks’s approach to critical race consciousness may disagree as to whether her ideas are fighting words or words to promote reconciliation, whether her strategies for change are primarily divisive or potentially unifying and restorative. For hooks, however, the mission has been clear from her earliest days of scholarship: the struggle reflects a “passionate commitment to a vision of social transformation that [is] rooted in a radically democratic idea of freedom and justice for all”⁴ specifically in reference to race, class, and gender. People who are accustomed to being in a dominant role may not appreciate hooks’s radical call for equality, but just like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s declaration that efforts to advance

the cause of progressive human relations can be characterized by either “chaos or community,” hooks holds firm to the proposition that “we would be unable to go forward if we did not experience a ‘true revolution of values.’”⁵ All vestiges of white supremacy must be removed if these values are to be realized.

Influential Frames of Reference on hooks’s Worldview: The Personal Narrative, Feminism, and Postmodernism

There are many theoretical influences on hooks’s writings. Three key orientations to her scholarship are (1) an informed, reflective, first-person reporting on issues relating to race, class, and gender based on her own experiences; (2) an aggressive critique of the white supremacist foundations of much traditional feminist thinking; and (3) an application of postmodern thinking that resists the all too common urge to supplant the voices of marginalized and oppressed people with the central voice of the dominant, authoritative, elitist white male perspective.

Peggy McIntosh refers to the “earned strength” of individuals who face different kinds of discrimination and oppression on a regular basis and how those experiences can contribute to a deeper level of understanding and competency, as opposed to a false sense of “meritocracy” that comes from being in a privileged, dominant role in society.⁶ In hooks’s case, her personal narratives, feminism, and postmodern perspectives are all significantly impacted by her own struggle to have a free voice. There is a palpable sense that when she opposes racism, sexism, and classism in her professional and literary life that she speaks from a wounded and defiant position of strength; that she is not just talking about these “isms” but that she is exposing truths that many academics in predominantly white institutions often do not want to see.

On the Personal Narrative

hooks writes: “...many of the people who are writing about domination and oppression are distanced from the pain, the woundedness, the ugliness. That it’s so much of the time just a subject—a ‘discourse’.... Sometimes working in the academic place I have found it’s my peers not understanding this pain that has made for such a deep sense of isolation.”⁷ For hooks, the reality of suffering makes the political personal. She describes the pain on two levels: “the pain of white supremacist oppression and exploitation and the pain that comes from resistance and struggle. The first pain wounds us, the second pain helps heal our wound.”⁸ Rather than denying or escaping from the pain, hooks’s response has been to take an unflinching course of action against oppression, motivated by injuries to dignity and social injustice.

hooks describes a frightening childhood experience of walking from her segregated black community past a white neighborhood to her grandmother’s house with “those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant those porches seemed to say *danger*, you do not belong here, you are not safe.”⁹ Or again, in adolescence, having gone through a period of hostility and loss with the desegregation of schools and how she “had to give up the familiar and enter a world

that seemed cold and strange, not our world, not our school. We were certainly on the margin, no longer at the center, and it hurt.”¹⁰ These past experiences did not simply fade away. They functioned as a prelude to hooks’s experiences in higher education. As McIntosh notes, one of the damaging aspects of facing racism in the academy is that a person of color may not feel “real” or “welcome” in the institution¹¹ and a sense of being perceived as an interloper begins to take its toll.

hooks also reminisces about a friendship with a white male peer in her teen years: “Racial difference meant that we had to struggle to claim the integrity of that bonding. We had no illusions. We knew there would be obstacles, conflict and pain... we knew we would have to pay a price for this friendship, that we would need to possess the courage to stand up for our belief in democracy, in racial justice, in the transformative power of love.”¹² In the academy, hooks still perceives the white faces staring down at her with hate, still feels that she is in someone else’s white world, and still knows she will face negative repercussions when she fights for equality. Rarely does she find people in the academy with the courage and the commitment that her white teenage friend demonstrates but there is hopefulness in hooks’s voice that righteousness and social justice will ultimately prevail in higher education, if resistance against white supremacy continues.

On Feminism

hooks is a feminist who believes that the “feminist struggle must be disassociated from white women’s rights efforts, which support white supremacy”¹³ The “reformist concerns” articulated by white feminists are considered primarily to be “nonradical” and “privileged.”¹⁴ hooks views white women in the academy as happy to have faculty of color align with them in a common cause against white male privilege but as unwilling to advance diversity initiatives beyond the bounds of gender, thereby promoting a structure where white women are in charge and faculty of color are treated as minions. “Historically, white female efforts to maintain racial dominance were directly connected to the politics of heterosexism within a white supremacist patriarchy.”¹⁵ She adds: “The contemporary call for sisterhood, the radical white woman’s appeal to black women, and all women of color to join the feminist movement, is seen by many black women as yet another expression of white female denial of the reality of racist domination, of their complicity in the exploitation and oppression of black women and black people.”¹⁶

The interpersonal dynamics emanating from white feminists toward black women faculty (as perceived by hooks) are characterized by fear, hatred, and potential exploitation. White feminist academics see their black female counterparts “as being difficult, problematic, irrational and ‘insane’” to such a degree of severity that “until we can acknowledge the negative history which shapes and informs our contemporary interaction, there can be no honest, meaningful dialogue between the two groups.”¹⁷ hooks’s understanding of the heart of the problem stems from being on the receiving end of white supremacy with feminist academics where “I was made ‘Other’ there in that space with them.... They greeted me as colonizers.”¹⁸ White feminists frequently want to appropriate “discussions of race and racism, while

abandoning the effort to construct a space for sisterhood, a space where they could examine and change attitudes and behavior towards black women and all women of color.”¹⁹ hooks notes that white feminists seem to “feel more comfortable with black women who appear victimized or needy,” leading to the ironic result that “white feminists sometimes patronize black women” and their “condescension further estranges black and white women,” which further becomes “an expression of racism.”²⁰

On Postmodernism

hooks’s theorizing benefits greatly from other writers’ works within the postmodern tradition. Her particular focus in the literature, however, is to advocate for a “radical postmodernist practice,” most powerfully conceptualized as a “politics of difference” that would “incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed black people”; but she despairs that much contemporary discourse in postmodern literature states its case “in the very master narrative it claims to challenge.”²¹ hooks wants to have voices of people of color heard without being filtered through dominating academic elites. She wants postmodern theorizing to make an actual difference in the lives of disenfranchised people, rather than merely ending up in the form of academic publications managed by representatives of white hierarchies. hooks believes a key problem in postmodern work is that “third world nationals, elites and white critics” of the genre often “passively absorb white supremacist thinking” and therefore are “not likely to produce liberatory theory that will challenge racist domination, or promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality.”²²

From hooks’s point of view, some basic problems with postmodern emphases in the academy are (1) the assumption that whiteness should be the gold standard from which “difference” is discussed, and even worse, being the unexamined norm (which tends only to increase white hegemony); (2) the preponderance of white faculty members without a radical consciousness of race or with little exposure to people of color and who control the marketplace of ideas on race and ethnicity but rarely encounter people of other cultures until a student of color arrives in their classroom; (3) studies in diversity being managed in ways that perpetuate the white status quo while treating selected “other” populations as interesting, trendy (albeit, tangential, fundamentally inconsequential) objects of study; (4) lumping all people of color together without distinguishing differences and without legitimizing their worldviews; and (5) the continued risk of treating people of color as primitive, inferior, or fantasy-oriented images while reinscribing the power base of white supremacist patriarchy (which, according to hooks’s analysis, lays the groundwork for exploitation).

Four of hooks’s Insights On “White Supremacy” in the Academy

hooks is an action-oriented academic. She intends for her work to be “an oppositional, progressive, cultural politic that seeks to link theory and practice, that has

as its most central agenda sharing knowledge and information in ways that transform how we think about our social reality.”²³ Active verbs lay out her intentions most clearly regarding white supremacy in the academy: *reject* the paradigm of the servant-served; *affirm* a presence as a black body in the white academy; *overturn* the colonized mind; and *resist* a white commodification of blackness.

On Rejecting the Paradigm of Servant-Served

From hooks’s perspective, the relationship dynamics of the academy are not too far removed from white domestic settings with black hired help in a previous era. In those settings, the “point of contact between black women and white women was one of servant-served, a hierarchal, power-based relationship. . . . Black women were the servants, and white women were the served.”²⁴ This pattern of dominance from the past was lived out “in the context of familiarity and commonality (the belief that it was the female’s role to tend the home was shared by white and black women).”²⁵ hooks says that when white women in the academy are challenged with this old relationship dynamic they typically assume “a posture of innocence and denial” evoking “memories in black women of negative encounters” as servants when white women would have power, privilege, and demands but still want to enjoy a family atmosphere with their servants.²⁶

On Affirming a Presence as a Black Body in the White Academy

hooks writes: “as a black woman, I have always been acutely aware of the presence of my body in those settings” that are predominantly white, like most institutions of higher education; adding “if you want to remain, you’ve got, in a sense, to remember yourself. . . . as a body in a system that has not become accustomed to your presence or your physicality.”²⁷ She notes that ideally a professor should be able to be in the academy primarily as “a mind and not a body”²⁸ but that such privilege is reserved for the most powerful members of the academy—that is, usually white men—who can disregard their physicality because they have an air of ownership of the space and who can choose to violate “other people’s body space” if they so desire.²⁹

Authenticity guides hooks’s thinking when she considers issues related to *compliance* with white norms and *inclusion* with white organizational life in the academy. Her understanding of the need to affirm her black bodily presence is instructive regarding both issues. hooks recalls: “When I interviewed for my job at Yale, white female advisors who had never before commented on my hair encouraged me not to wear braids or a large natural to the interview. Although they did not say straighten your hair, they were suggesting that I change my hairstyle so that it would most resemble theirs, so that it would indicate a certain conformity.”³⁰ Another important symbol for hooks is the common practice of having black bodies on campus (think of a token number of black faculty members and a limited number of black students in the overall student body, and a concentration of black athletes, black service staff), without there being a concomitant sense of inclusiveness within the academy. hooks compares campuses to a “plantation drama where the labor and

bodies of black folks were made to serve the interests of a system that has no intention of fostering and promoting the social and political growth of black people or eradicating racism and white supremacy.”³¹

On Overturning the Colonized Mind

A colonized mind requires “exorcism,” “from dependency, in the case of the colonized, and from imperialist, racist perceptions, representations, and institutions...in the case of the colonizer.”³² hooks observes that “one mark of oppression” from the years of slavery and racial apartheid in the United States was an attempt to “erase all traces” of black people’s subjectivity “so they could be better, less threatening servants.”³³ The academy needs black scholars who are outspoken and independent in their thinking: “the mind that resists colonization struggles for free expression.”³⁴ The issues at universities and colleges are not simply to be unique or provocative but to work for change in the power structure of dominant, typically white, male elite groups (with representatives that are women and people of color). The “less threatening servants” in the academy may collude with and accommodate the white supremacist culture rather than dismantling it.

hooks also says that currently a major task at hand on campuses around the country is “to affirm multiple black identities” as a means of challenging “colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy.”³⁵ The key variable relates to where faculty members stand ideologically. “Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed...?”³⁶ hooks adds: “Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory.”³⁷ The colonized mind goes along to get along.

On Resisting a White Commodification of Blackness

“From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.”³⁸ hooks sees that many white intellectual elites investigate black culture and identity like a “privileged interpreter—cultural overseers”³⁹ in charge of a production of ideas and images. The end result is that there are passionate discussions about race (“divorced from a recognition of racism”)⁴⁰ with little introspection regarding the perpetuation of white supremacy in these discussions, with only cursory treatment of political or historical contexts of domination and oppression to highlight the ongoing pain and suffering of those who are targets of racism, and without mutual exchange between the overseers and the subjects of their scrutiny.

Black Studies and other foci relating to race and ethnicity on campuses are also often reduced to the status of “commodity” by white administrators and academics, rather than being valued as liberating, intellectually significant programs. Studies on race and ethnicity are often more acceptable to the white supremacist culture of

the academy if they make the decision makers in universities and colleges appear to accommodate diverse student populations.⁴¹ In hooks's calculation, however, "no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity, can be manipulated by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification."⁴² One of hooks's interpretations of a scene in a film captures the sentiment: "White racism, imperialism, and sexist domination prevail by courageous consumption. It is by eating the Other...that one asserts power and privilege."⁴³

Suggestions to Effect Social and Institutional Change in the Academy

While hooks is extremely critical of the ways the academy remains a bastion of white supremacy, she espouses hope that radical change is still possible. To effectively revolutionize the academy, she charges the following: that radical people must work together; that appropriate curricula and pedagogy must be developed; and that space must be created to prepare for change.

On Radical People Working Collaboratively

hooks calls for collective action: "Fundamentally, it is our collective responsibility as radical black people and people of color, and as white people, to construct models for social change...to suggest that change is just something an individual can do on his or her own in isolation with other racist white people, is utterly misleading."⁴⁴ To black people she states a theme of solidarity and inclusiveness: "If I commit myself politically to black liberation struggle, to the struggle to end white supremacy, I am not making a commitment to working only for and with black people; I must engage in struggle with all willing comrades to strengthen our awareness and our resistance."⁴⁵

Hooks recognizes that black persons in the academy often tire of the feeling of being used by those who are not authentic in their desire for change and who seek merely to give the impression of inclusion and appreciation of diversity. She also observes that people on the margins in the academy often are asked to commit to hard work with an apparent, liberatory edge but without there being any change to the white power hierarchy of the academy. She, no doubt, understands that for decades people in positions of power in institutions of higher education have played the game of impression management about diversity while all the time making little change, if any, to administrative structure, policies, to the faculty, to the curriculum, and to the context for students. In short, business as usual has been the order of the day in most institutions of higher education. Nonetheless, she concludes:

If as a black person I say to a white person who shows a willingness to commit herself or himself to the struggle to end white supremacy that I refuse to affirm or help in that endeavor, it is a gesture that undermines my commitment to that struggle. Many black people have essentially responded in this way because we do not want to do the work for white people, and most importantly we cannot do the work, yet this often seems to be what is asked of us."⁴⁶

hooks, however, notes that “those white people who want to continue the dominant-subordinate relationship so endemic to racist exploitation by insisting that we ‘serve’ them—that we do the work of challenging and changing their consciousness—are acting in bad faith.”⁴⁷

Another major problem hooks addresses regarding collective effort is the repetitive occurrence within the academy of lip service to change, without a commitment to structural change—the instances of which are not likely to lead to the deconstruction of white supremacy, but continue to fulfill the institution’s subtext of white hegemony (even if benevolent on the surface). “Too often, it seems, the point is to promote the *appearance* of difference within intellectual discourse, a ‘celebration’ that fails to ask who is sponsoring the party and who is extending the invitations.”⁴⁸ To resist being co-opted on the one hand, and being nonparticipatory on the other, hooks recommends putting energy on transformative change that is “fundamentally linked to collective effort to transform those structures that reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy.”⁴⁹

On Developing Appropriate Curricula and Pedagogy

hooks describes the need to change course content and teaching methods. She recalls the backlash against earlier efforts to include content on cultural diversity in traditional coursework in the academy. She remembers people who tried to incorporate cultural diversity training at that time:

[but failed because they] ...had to confront the limitations of their training, knowledge and possible loss of “authority.” Indeed exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a “safe” and harmonious place was challenged. It was hard for individuals to fully grasp the idea that recognition of difference might also require of us a willingness to see and experience the classroom change, to allow for shifts in relations between students. A lot of people panicked. What they saw happening was not the comforting “melting pot” idea of cultural diversity, the rainbow coalition where we would all be grouped together, in our difference, but wearing the same “have a nice day smile.” This was the stuff of colonizing fantasy, a perversion of the progressive vision of cultural diversity.⁵⁰

Those faculty members, previously supportive of broadening the content of their disciplines, became fearful and joined the old guard against cultural diversity in the curriculum: “casting votes in directions that would restore biased traditions or prohibit changes in faculty and curriculum that were to bring diversity of representation and perspective.”⁵¹ Even though the first wave of bringing cultural diversity to the curricula ran into problems of incompetence and negative reactions from some faculty, the need for a thorough infusion of cultural diversity should still be an important goal. There remains an urgency for “a recognition of cultural diversity, a re-thinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in

how we teach and what we teach”; in order to restore “life to a corrupt and dying academy.”⁵²

When hooks first started lecturing in the academy she was aware of herself “as a subject in history, a member of a marginalized and oppressed group, victimized by racism, sexism, and class elitism” and had a “tremendous fear” that she might “teach in a manner that would reinforce those hierarchies.”⁵³ She recognized that the classroom can easily degenerate into a microcosm of domination-subordination rather than a place where liberatory consciousness is practiced. Influenced by Paulo Freire,⁵⁴ she does not want to deposit knowledge, she wants to stimulate learning. Faculty members already have expert and legitimate power in the classroom. What benefits a student most, particularly in reference to understanding the impact of diversity, is to honor experiential knowledge while intersecting the student’s perceptions with other knowledge bases, with the goals of informing and emancipating minds. hooks’s emphasis on pedagogy as a means of “coming to voice”⁵⁵ is a way of overcoming supremacy and elitist motifs without undermining scholarship and serious education.

On Creating Space in the Academy

hooks recognizes certain opportunities that do exist currently within the academy for increased attention to cultural diversity and highlights their importance to progressive change in the academy: “Current emphasis on the development of cultural studies in academic settings as well as the production of more and more publications that are willing to produce diverse perspectives on culture is helping create a climate where more black artists and intellectuals can do cultural criticism.”⁵⁶

hooks advocates seizing space in the academy, so that progressive scholarship and learning may flourish, and sees this as having to come from collective action undertaken by those on the margins who need to create a “community of resistance.”⁵⁷ This space, she believes, will precipitate healing and transformation because it will be “where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality.”⁵⁸ Aware of the unwelcoming white supremacist setting of the academy, she asserts the need to be proactive and to make the margins a place of recovery, empowerment, creativity, resistance and voice, rather than a place of limits, parameters, and silence, where those in power relegate people they see as outsiders.⁵⁹

hooks knows from her own experiences in the academy that she is “located in the margin” but she makes “a definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility...that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle.”⁶⁰ She makes clear that this position is her choice, that it is revolutionary and that there are important attendant processes. In the end it can lead to the desired progress in the academy: “Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking.”⁶¹

For hooks, creating space is essential for transformation of the academy. She knows that real change to the system will not come easily or quickly, and that people will need to be courageous, tenacious, committed, and patient to keep going to reach transformational results. There should be no running away when things get difficult, no fearfulness of making mistakes, and recognition that the struggle will be protracted. The watchwords are patience and vigilance and the mission is a cultural revolution of the academy: "To commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy into a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning, we must embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged, we cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth."⁶²

Conclusion

One significant, even perplexing, challenge for any social justice advocate is how to expose problems honestly and fully without being mired in a problem-oriented, as opposed to a solution-oriented, process of change. hooks fits handsomely within the Saul Alinsky⁶³ tradition of revolutionary radicals who speak the truth and provoke their adversaries, never shying away from the fight for progressive change, being strategic, persistent, and intellectually advanced.

Many of hooks's insights are garnered from a temporal focus on the past because of her own pain and the soul wounds of other oppressed people and because in refusing to forget she honors the struggle for equality and fuels the resistance against white hegemony in the present. Much of her spatial focus is on developing a separate space for marginalized people to heal and strengthen bonds, creating sanctuaries from which to nurture solidarity and inspire direction for those who refuse to accept domination. hooks, therefore, does not advocate for an integrated model of community within the academy as a whole, *at this point in time*, because she thinks centers of higher education are so systemically infused with patriarchy, white privilege, and elitism that unity of effort is unrealistic. In addition, the white supremacist culture of the academy has no apparent intention of changing to a diverse, equitable, fully welcoming environment: from a privileged position, the general rule is that marginalized groups can assimilate, but only according to the pace and standards of those in the dominant roles.

It is probably accurate to say that most white academics do not want hooks's truths, and may not be able to handle those truths, feeling overloaded by open, frank discussions on race. There is often a "get over it" attitude (or blatant denial) within the academy and the presumption by many of its leaders and members that almost everyone is basically on the side of progressive, incremental reform. The tendency is to collude and act as if all is well. The radical voice is tolerated but not heard, in part because the homeostasis of the system is at stake. Kurt Lewin's⁶⁴ classic model of organizational change identifies driving forces and restraining forces in defense of the status quo. hooks is the driving force and not only is the white power base of the academy the restraining force, the status quo represented at universities and colleges goes deep into the social fabric of the country.

Empathic readers of hooks's analyses must keep an eye on the needs of students who are posed toward the future and who will benefit from a strength-based, solution oriented approach to white supremacy in the academy. "The challenge comes in being specific and proactive enough to root out practices of privilege, wherein the next generation...are neither contained by, nor peripheral to, a racially-biased in-group process."⁶⁵ hooks consistently raises the issues without flinching. She knows the grip of white supremacy will not be released voluntarily but there will also need to be some healing touches as the academy—one of the most prized and valuable institutions in society—is challenged to evolve into more of an equitable, beloved community.

Notes

1. hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 184.
2. Ibid., 185. For decades, the term *white supremacy* has defined hooks's radical race consciousness regarding the academy. In hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 186, she writes:

A piece I wrote for *Z Magazine* in January 1988 on white supremacy began with a declaration of solidarity between black Americans and black South Africans, stating that we share a common struggle rooted in resistance—the fight to end racism and white supremacist domination of black people globally. After my article was published, several white left academic colleagues let me know that it was misguided—that they did not agree with the idea that the United States is a white supremacist society. These colleagues have made their academic fame writing about race—interpreting black folks, our history, our culture. They no longer supported my intellectual efforts after the publication of this piece. For me, it was a militant piece, voicing ideas many black folks hold but dare not express lest we terrify and alienate the white folks we encounter daily. White and black folks told me this piece was “too extreme.” Whatever its form, black militancy is always too extreme in the white supremacist context, too out-of-order, too dangerous..

3. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 15.
4. hooks, “A Revolution of Values: The Promise of Multi-Cultural Change,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 26, no. 1 (1993): 6.
5. Cf. hooks, “A Revolution of Values,” 6. “As I grew up politically, I placed alongside the struggle to end racism a commitment to ending sexism and sexism oppression, to eradicating systems of class exploitation. Aware that we are living in a culture of domination I ask myself now as I did more than twenty years ago as I go about my daily life: what values and habits of being reflect my/our commitment to freedom?”
6. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, ed. M. Andersen and P. Hill Collins (1988; repr., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 102.
7. hooks, *Yearning*, 215.
8. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 184.
9. hooks, *Black Looks*, 175.
10. hooks, “A Revolution of Values,” 4.
11. McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” 101–102.
12. hooks, “A Revolution of Values,” 5.
13. hooks, *Yearning*, 220.
14. Ibid., 221. “Right now when it comes to black women I am more concerned that we begin to think critically about sexist exploitation and oppression in our lives and envision strategies for resistance, some of which will no doubt be linked to those of white women, and all women, and some of which will be expressive of our particular concerns as black women.”

15. hooks, *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 95.
16. Ibid., 102.
17. Ibid. hooks comments further: "Our desire for an honorable sisterhood, one that emerged from the willingness of all women to face our histories, was often ignored. Most white women dismissed us as 'too angry'...many black women were devastated and worn out. We felt betrayed; white women had not fulfilled the promise of sisterhood" (103).
18. hooks, *Yearning*, 151.
19. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 103. hooks argues further that many black women in the academy feel "that the majority of white women still assert power even as they address issues of race. As one black woman puts it, 'It burns me up to be treated like shit by white women who are busy getting their academic recognition, promotions, more money, et cetera, doing "great" work on the topic of race'" (104), observing that "it was [black women academics'] fear that their resources would be appropriated by white women that led them to avoid participating in [the] feminist movement" (105). This perceived theft of intellectual property is linked to "what many white women fear" as being "unmasked by black women." The treachery is such that, cyclically, black women will often "not respond to friendly overtures by white women for fear that they will be betrayed, that at some unpredictable moment the white woman will assert power" (107).
20. Ibid., 108.
21. hooks, *Yearning*, 25.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 6.
24. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 94.
25. Ibid., 94.
26. Ibid., 102. A particular point of annoyance for hooks is with "the increasing institutionalization and professionalization of feminist work focused on the construction of feminist theory and the dissemination of feminist knowledge, women have assumed positions of power that enable them to reproduce the servant-served paradigm in a radically different context. Now black women are placed in the position of serving white female desire to know more about race and racism, to 'master' the subject" (103). Meanwhile, hooks argues, "White women who have yet to get a critical handle on the meaning of 'whiteness' in their lives, the representation of whiteness in their literature, or the white supremacy that shapes their social status and are now explicating blackness without critically questioning whether their work emerges from an aware antiracist environment" (104).
27. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 135.
28. Ibid., 137.
29. hooks, *Yearning*, 169.
30. hooks, "Straightening Our Hair," 6. hooks's arguments on this symbolic point of hair style are helpful to understand her unwavering challenge to any position within the academy that appears to her to be supportive of white supremacist standards: she maintains, for example, that wearing black hair naturally, rather than straightened, asserts black identity; whereas, "Individual preferences (whether rooted in self hate or not) cannot negate the reality that our collective obsession with straightening black hair reflects the psychology of oppression and the impact of racist colonization" (7). In the 1960s hooks recalls that "many young black folks found just how much political value was placed on straightened hair as a sign of respectability and conformity to societal expectations" (5). Or, "Responses to natural hair is perceived in white supremacist culture as not only ugly but frightening. We also internalize that fear. The extent to which we are comfortable with our hair usually reflects on our overall feelings about our bodies" (5). When thinking about "changing her style just for fun...which could be simply playful on my part...I know that such a gesture would carry other implications beyond my control. The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful. To make such a gesture as an expression of individual freedom and choice would make me complicit with a politics of domination that hurts us" (8).
31. hooks, *Black Looks*, 84.

32. Ibid., 1.
33. Ibid., 168.
34. hooks, *Yearning*, 151.
35. Ibid., 28.
36. Ibid., 145.
37. Ibid., 29. hooks recognizes the impact of disrupting the colonized/colonizer mindset: "Indeed the very meaning of 'home' changes with experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation.... One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting" (148).
38. hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.
39. hooks, *Yearning*, 8–9.
40. Ibid., 52.
41. Cf. hooks, *Black Looks*: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," 21.
42. Ibid., 25.
43. Ibid., 36.
44. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 193.
45. Ibid., 194.
46. Ibid., 193–94.
47. Ibid.
48. hooks, *Yearning*, 54.
49. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 195.
50. hooks, "A Revolution of Values," 9.
51. Ibid., 9. hooks also mentions "tactics of ostracization, belittlement, etc. to dissuade junior faculty members from making paradigm shifts that would lead to changes in curriculum, scholarly research, writing and teaching practices" (10).
52. hooks, "A Revolution of Values," 8.
53. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 142. "Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory consciousness, it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom. So many of us have critiqued the individual white male scholars who push critical pedagogy yet who do not alter their classroom practices, who assert race, class, and gender privilege, without interrogating their conduct" (147).
54. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; repr., New York: Continuum/2003).
55. Cf. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 148: "One of the most misunderstood aspects of my writing on pedagogy is the emphasis on *voice*. Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects. What many professors are frightened of is precisely that."
56. hooks, *Yearnings*, 5.
57. Ibid., 149.
58. Ibid., 147. hooks adds: "Black folks coming from poor, underclass communities, who enter universities or privileged cultural settings unwilling to surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there, all 'sign' of our class and cultural 'difference,' who are unwilling to play the role of 'exotic Other,' must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact" (148).
59. Cf. hooks, *Yearnings*: "Our very presence is a disruption.... Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them. Mostly, of course, we are not there. We never 'arrive' or 'can't stay'" (148). "We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, of wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain..."; whereas, it is possible to deliver "a message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space.... We greet you as liberators" (152).
60. Ibid., 153.

61. hooks, *Black Looks*, 4.
62. hooks, "A Revolution of Values," 11.
63. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).
64. Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory of Social Science* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).
65. Jeanette R. Davidson, Tim Davidson, and Judy Crain, "White Skin and Sheepskins: Challenging the Status Quo in the Education of Helping Professionals," *The Journal of Intergroup Relations* 27, no 4 (Winter 2000–2001): 13.

5

Engaging bell hooks

How Teacher Educators Can Work to Sustain Themselves and Their Work

GRETCHEN GIVENS GENERETT

I answered that to me “critical thinking” was the primary element allowing the possibility of change. Passionately insisting that no matter what one’s class, race, gender, or social standing, I shared my beliefs that without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow. In our society, which is so fundamentally anti-intellectual, critical thinking is not encouraged. Engaged pedagogy has been essential to my development as an intellectual, as a teacher/professor because the heart of this approach is critical thinking. (bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as an Act of Freedom* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 202)

In my development as a conscious person and engaged citizen I think bell hooks’ works profoundly impact my growth, but her work was able to challenge me because I was in an environment where being subversive was nurtured. If I were in a different academic setting her works would have merely resonated with me. Luckily, I was given the opportunity to study her books and essays and attempt to apply some of her progressive ideas to my life. In my mind, this is theory meeting practice at the most basic and fundamental level: the individual. (Nicole S. Barden)¹

Nicole S. Barden, and I are sixteen years apart—we are cousins and she attends my alma mater, Spelman College, a historically black women’s college in Atlanta, Georgia. She is the author of the second quote above. We have many things in common, but perhaps the one I cherish the most is our love and respect for bell hooks. I was first introduced to bell hooks’s work at Spelman. The first time I read *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I had never read anything like this before, where being black and female was centered, where the impact of socialization in America was critiqued. I chose Spelman as my undergraduate institution because I was the norm and not the exception and hooks’s work was further evidence of this. After reading her work, I signed up for English and Women’s Studies classes that allowed me to read more bell hooks and other critical feminist theorists.

Education at Spelman was like no other learning experience I had ever had. Unlike previous teacher centered classrooms where educators possessed all of the power and significant knowledge, I was enrolled in classes where I was told to, “Claim your space!”² My professor explained that claiming my space meant that it was my responsibility to articulate my thoughts, ideas, and opinions in the classroom. It was my responsibility to give voice to my lived experiences as an African American and as a woman. I was told that this was my classroom, my learning process, and it was my responsibility to get what I needed from it. My responsibility as a student had never been explained to me this way. I graduated from a high school where academic achievement for African Americans was the exception as opposed to the rule. As the exception, I longed to be considered the norm and was aware of this when I decided to attend Spelman. As I took classes and began to hear myself give voice to my lived experiences in connection with the curriculum I was being exposed to, it occurred to me that I was learning a new way of being-in-the-world. Claiming my space in the classroom quickly translated into claiming my space in the world. I began to analyze how current events impacted my life and the lives of other African Americans and women. For the first time, I began to analyze the intersections of race, class, and gender. bell hooks’s work was central to this analysis, but more importantly, it was central to my development as an African American woman.

It is no accident that I am a professor or that I am a teacher educator. Any profession I embarked upon would have to allow me to continue to feed the hunger for knowledge, growth, and development that my college years did. Anything that I did for a living would have to give me the opportunity to address this hunger for knowledge in other starving young, African American women. The process I experienced at Spelman was so powerful that I wanted to understand how to create similar experiences for other students. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* hooks speaks specifically to educators in public schools and those of us who teach at colleges and universities. She outlines the benefits of teaching for self-actualization and of creating an engaged pedagogy. Reading these works forced me to reminisce about my own learning processes. While philosophically I believe in hooks’s works in these two texts, I now realize that I personally know the benefits of an engaged pedagogy because I experienced it as a student.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks promotes engaged pedagogy as a strategy for addressing the “traditional transfer of knowledge approach to education.”³ Invoking Paulo Freire’s *Education for Critical Consciousness*, hooks contends that cultural pluralism is the way to transform teacher/student relationships and ultimately develop critical consciousness in students. Like Freire and other critical theorists, hooks calls for transformation through changing traditional paradigms so that personal and community empowerment is the end result of the process. Critical pedagogy, as defined by theorists such as Ira Shor, Henri Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Michael Apple, argues that school practices are designed to maintain and sustain the status quo by reinforcing white supremacy, maintaining patriarchy, and promoting capitalist values. hooks draws an important distinction between critical pedagogy and engaged pedagogy. Unlike

conventional critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, hooks argues that engaged pedagogy “means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”⁴ Self-actualization, as described by hooks, centers on the work of the Vietnamese Zen monk, peace activist, and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. hooks writes, “whereas Freire was primarily concerned with the mind, Thich Nhat Hanh offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of the body, and spirit.”⁵ She continues:

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that “the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher, or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.” In the United States it is rare that anyone talks about teachers in university settings as healers. And it is even more rare to hear anyone suggest that teachers have any responsibility to be self-actualized individuals.⁶

In educational jargon, self-actualization reads a lot like transformation. Unlike reform where the same components and methods are rearranged into a seemingly new model, transformation works “to develop new systems, new products, new experiences, new approaches, and new roles—preferably all at once around concepts of teaching and learning.”⁷ In educational literature, transformation is not limited to systems, models, and programs. It also includes changing individual people and the lives they lead. As Jack Mezirow explains in his definition of perspective transformation:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.⁸

In addition to the intellectual dimensions of their students’ growth, educators interested in transformation also grapple with the emotional dimensions that inform learning. The idea of individual change has so captured the imagination of educators that even national accrediting bodies seem to allude to the concept.⁹ Interestingly, the transformation literature speaks most directly to the transformation of students as opposed to the transformation of *teacher educators*. One could incorrectly conclude from this that all professors, because they are teacher educators, have already been transformed. Or, that they are all self-actualized. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Creating an engaged pedagogy in schools of education where personal transformation occurs is not easy.¹⁰ Combine the era of high stakes testing and accountability with fear of the unknown and comfort of the easy and it becomes very difficult to convince teacher educators, let alone prospective teachers, that the profession is a safe place to enact a curriculum of transformation. For students and teacher educators alike, self-actualization within an educational community is frightening.

Students, accustomed to education being purely an intellectual endeavor, find that when they are asked to do work that involves reflection or self-analysis are worried that their process of discovery will be held against them. In her work with students Brooks writes:

Overwhelmingly, students have shared that it is the “willingness to risk” (i.e. sharing tenuous ideas; sounding naïve, uninformed or even downright foolish; being thought of as inconsiderate, arrogant, and even heartless) that they have found to be the most challenging, and possibly “unobtainable,” to realize together.¹¹

Teacher educators, schooled in environments very similar to that of their students, find that in the role of professor they subconsciously fall into traditional routines, even when the desire is to enact an engaged pedagogy. This dilemma is evidenced in my own work with Sheryl Cozart and Paula Price, where we contemplate the role of autobiographical representations in preservice teacher education, citing how uneasy we sometimes feel:

Many days we feel vulnerable as we look out across the sea of faces—most of whom are White, female and middle-class—staring back at us as we speak intellectually and personally to the lived experiences of the oppressed, all the while *hoping* that we can engage the students long enough to make a personal connection. The days when we feel particularly vulnerable each of us conjures up African American intellectuals who wrote (and continue to write) about how they stay the course. We also call each other.¹²

Paralyzed by the isolation, marginalization, and loneliness that can plague non-traditional academics, teacher educators attempting to create an engaged pedagogy oftentimes find themselves depleted and unable to work against “reinforcing existing systems of domination.”¹³ Yet, for those of us who remember why we became teacher educators, not creating an engaged curriculum is more frightening. Informal surveys of teacher educators indicate that there are many weary days when they are convinced that their conscious efforts to practice engaged pedagogy make no difference in the grand scheme. All too frequently one hears that the *norms* now associated with standardized tests in K-12 have effectively destroyed any real opportunities that existed to convince prospective teachers to be critical thinkers. I find that students entering into universities today are more obsessed with grades and tests scores, comforted by the banking system of education (they want to know exactly what the professor wants so they can get a grade), and frustrated when asked to demonstrate critical thinking skills.¹⁴ It is as if students realize that the traditional memorize, regurgitate process of schooling is much “easier” than being engaged and having to think critically about what it is they learn and the ramifications of such ways of knowing. As hooks reminds us, becoming a critical thinker is a “threat to authority.”¹⁵ It is also a threat to many prospective teachers, the majority of whom are white, middle-class, and enter the profession because of very positive schooling experiences. In other words, “it ain’t broke. It worked for me” attitudes are prevalent while children and their parents are vilified. For teacher educators, remaining

audaciously hopeful, “the ability to take action when there is little evidence that doing so will produce a positive outcome” in this context is daunting.¹⁶ Again, hooks’s words inspire, “Passionately insisting that no matter what one’s class, race, gender, or social standing, I shared my beliefs that without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow.”¹⁷ I recall my learning experience at Spelman and I am reminded of that process through Nicole’s words, “In my development as a conscious person and engaged citizen I think bell hooks’ works profoundly impact my growth, but her work was able to challenge me because I was in an environment where being subversive was nurtured.” Their comments remind me that it is imperative that while teacher educators should work to transform students, they must continue to embark upon a process of self-actualization all the while encouraging their colleagues to do the same. Read closely, hooks’s work models ways in which teacher educators can embody engaged pedagogy that is transformative. These ways include an awareness of one’s self-narrative, creating communities of solidarity across difference, and being hopeful.

The Role of Narrative in Self-Actualization

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. The classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy. School was still a political place, since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn. Yet, the politics were no longer counter-hegemonic. We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks.¹⁸

When speaking, bell hooks often comments on how the painful stories of her life allow her to make sense of the pain in our social world. In many of her early writings, hooks’s presents a rich and disclosive narrative of her educational experiences from grade school to graduate school, whereby she is able to outline the joy and pain of education and theory.¹⁹ Because of an awareness of the impact of her own lived experiences, she can better empathize with the disappointments of others. Despite criticism of being narcissistic,²⁰ hooks’s vulnerability provides a particular type of insight into the impact of certain educational practices. Perhaps just as important, she provides an example of how others can use their own stories as the foundation to creating engaged pedagogy. hooks’s message to teacher educators is that educational transformation cannot take place until they first understand the impact of their own ways of knowing and being educated about their value system, beliefs, and desires for education. Hence, self-reflexivity is essential to educational transformation. Teacher educators have to be able to critically answer the question, “Why do I believe this and what outcome am I trying to produce?” For hooks, these

questions must be asked and addressed in terms of a broader understanding of the context of the larger social system.

hooks's personal story within the context of a cultural critique was what captured me as a student. Her story made the theory come to life. Her personal narrative made the theory consist of more than obtaining knowledge for knowledge's sake. I found that her story made obtaining knowledge for the sake of *self and others* the central concern. Specifically, the theory did not exist in a vacuum; the theory helped me to understand that what I was experiencing was also the experiences of others and that there were ideas out there to help me better articulate my lived experiences to people with different experiences. Her work was an incredible gift because it opened so many possibilities for me that my previous schooling had not. I accredit the opening of possibilities directly to being able to personally identify with hooks's story. In this way, narrative plays an important role in terms of functioning as a mirror in terms of which we can emulate and be encouraged to engage in self-critical reflection and transformation.

Teacher educators must be willing to explore the patterns, the connections and the disconnections of their lives, and, like any good researcher, turn it into data and analyze it. Then, they must share their findings in narrative form. For example, they must be able to interpret their lived experiences through the educational theory presented to their students. It is no coincidence K-12 teachers lament the discernible disconnect between theory and practice. During their training no one ever modeled for them how the theory they studied is actually connected to what they experienced as students, or what their students will experience every day. In other words, within the classroom, apparently there were no teacher educators who demonstrated how, for example, critical race theory, feminism, and poverty frame and continue to shape K-12 teachers' lives. Prospective teachers need to know that not every teacher is in the profession because they had wonderful teachers and role models. Some become teachers because of the *harm and hurt* perpetuated on them as students and they want to break that cycle. This is learned through narrative.

hooks explains why more teacher educators do not share their narratives. She asserts "the objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization."²¹ Simply put, the classroom is just not the place to bring our whole selves. Yet the impact of neglecting this aspect of learning has significant consequences. hooks' writes:

Denying the emotional presence and wholeness of students may help professors who are unable to connect focus more on the task of sharing information, facts, data, their interpretations, with no regard for listening to and hearing from students. It makes the classroom a setting where optimal learning cannot and will not occur.²²

hooks's definition of self-actualization, of being whole, requires that professors create classrooms where sharing stories is possible. To do this, we must know our own stories. Teaching for self-actualization requires that we share them.

In the absence of understanding how personal narratives shape who we are as

educators and the type of curriculum we create, we are likely to repeat many of the harmful acts of schooling that have been done to us. According to Kevin Kumashiro, repetition is when, “educational practices, perspectives, social relations and identities remain unquestioned”²³ and merely reinforce and sustain the very thing it is designed to dismantle. Mark Hicks and I assert that this is:

...where many well intentioned people become trapped. We routinely enter into the classroom ready to work with students on issues of their transformation without challenging our own set of assumptions and expectations. Failing to investigate and more importantly, begin to understand how our own lived histories—and the intentions that accompanied those histories—often [make] us ineffective at articulating our own needs and values.²⁴

Self-actualization as defined by hooks is supported by other theorists. Developmental psychologists and critical theorists²⁵ believe that acts of inquiry lead to the naming of less desirable aspects of our lives so that we can better take control of them, as opposed to those factors having control over us. If creating engaged pedagogy so that individual transformation is the result, teacher educators must be willing to critically investigate and share their own stories with students and colleagues.

Common Goals—Creating Communities of Solidarity across Differences

It is fashionable these days, when “difference” is a hot topic in progressive circles, to talk about “hybridity” and “border crossing,” but we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices.²⁶

For me, the hardest part of engaged pedagogy is community building. It is hard for me because it is painful to watch how inept we are as a culture when it comes to working across differences. I have been a member of socially conscious educational communities with the best of intentions and watched as projects slowly, but surely disintegrate because we were unable to effectively communicate across our race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Self-actualization, while an individual act of becoming whole, is also about developing healthy communities of solidarity that have common goals. Creating healthy, sustainable communities as a means of recreating the world is not a new revelation. At many times in history, philosophers, theologians, and other socially conscious theorists, whether through their activism or writings, have called for community building with each providing insightful ways of doing so. W. E. B. Du Bois,²⁷ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.²⁸ Mahatma Gandhi,²⁹ Anna Julia Cooper,³⁰ and others were exemplars in this area. The work of these great thinkers reminds us of our common goal of creating a more just and equitable world. Through their cultural analyses and personal stories, these conscious individuals understood that the best hope for creating a world that resists racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice requires the ability to cross cultural divides. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks remembers Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision for a “beloved community.”³¹ She writes:

His vision remains. King taught that the simple act of coming together would strengthen community. Yet before he was assassinated he was beginning to see that unlearning racism would require a change in both thinking and action, and that people could agree to come together across race, but they would not make a community.³²

Indeed, the work of building community across racial lines “remains difficult, even painful for both people of color and well-intentioned whites.”³³ Again, Hicks and I maintain:

People of color, long weary of efforts that promise equality and justice, can find working in such communities daunting reminders of how privilege can inoculate people from the realities of other people's lives. Those socialized into dominating systems of privilege find themselves exasperated by feelings of guilt, shame, or feeling as if they “never get it right.”³⁴

Such pain is ever present in schools of education when white prospective teachers espouse their “colorblindness” in classrooms with students of color. Because there are very few models explaining how to communicate about race within mixed groups, far too many times teacher educators fail to challenge such claims so as not to create too much dissension within the classroom “community.” This is when the ease of repetition and fear of vulnerability rears its ugly head. In the absence of analyzing our personal narratives, we are less likely to fully understand the types of communities we want to create, and therefore, as a result, we settle for communities that come together and are formed purely by chance. Given that our lived histories frame our personal understandings of community and our role within and responsibility to it, creating communities of solidarity with common goals requires thoughtful and careful planning.

Again, this can be difficult. hooks's personal story of schooling reminds us that the academy is designed for uniquely different individuals to proceed through the same white, male, privileged, heterosexual process of framing and interpreting knowledge. Yet, we each hold a different collection of “mental models”³⁵ that frame and interpret knowledge and therefore, have different understandings of what constitutes a community. The literature on whiteness outlines particular orientations and ways of knowing that shape whiteness in America. They include individual consciousness, an ethic of personal responsibility, and strong commitments to intellectual rather than emotional ways of knowing.³⁶ Since this orientation is the very foundation of higher education, as engaged teacher educators we are called to daringly challenge it by asking: what happens to the curriculum when people from historically marginalized groups enter and their ways of knowing suggest “multiplicity, for example, DuBois' ‘two-ness’”? Add to these different orientations various complex emotions and you have a storm brewing.³⁷

In an unpublished manuscript about my collaborative work as a professor in the Initiatives of Educational Transformation (IET) Program at George Mason University, I learned a great deal about myself as a collaborator within a community. Dr. Mark A. Hicks, my coauthor, colleague, and friend, sat down with me and together we wrote a paper hoping that it might provide some insight into our experiences as

African Americans working with well-intentioned white people seeking to create a transformative curriculum for teachers. What I learned about myself as a professional and community member was directly connected to who I am personally, to my own expectations, wants, needs, and desires. Mark and I learned five very important things about who we were when we came to that community:

1) We entered into [the] process with an unchallenged set of assumptions about what we [could] and should expect from our White colleagues; 2) We failed to understand how our own lived histories—and the good intentions that accompanied those histories—often made us ineffective at articulating our own needs and values; 3) We need to be conscious of how the historical freedom project of African Americans is subjected to issues of repetition; 4) People of color and Whites have different developmental needs that determine how transformation looks and feels; and finally, 5) that, in keeping with the tenets of transformative learning, all members of the collaborative needed to acquire new sets of skills and habits of mind in order to achieve these aims.³⁸

Working within the IET community reminded me that self-actualization is an on-going process and that multiple contexts and experiences are necessary for us to be fully actualized, to the extent to which this is possible.

In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks's reminds teacher educators that to "build a 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."³⁹ She continues, "when we take the theory, the explanations, and apply them concretely to our daily lives, to our experiences, we further and deepen the practice of anti-racist transformation."⁴⁰ In an effort to be better curriculum developers and colleagues, Mark and I:

...engaged in reflective exercises—journaling, reconstituting discussions and critical incidents—to unearth the source of our dissonance, trying to make meaning of how our own story fused with the larger narrative of which we were a part. We traced the trajectories of African American intellectual redwoods, like DuBois, Patricia Hill Collins, Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, Bayard Rustin, and Cornel West, reading their narratives and critiques of gender, race, spirituality and so forth. But we also found ourselves surfacing and then tracing a personal journey much closer to home, that of our parents and grandparents who modeled how to negotiate what it means to be a person of color in a world that both welcomes us, and also treats us like strangers.⁴¹

We took our professional tools and used them to make us better community members. For me, the process was a beginning. For the first time, I was able to articulate many aspects of collaboration and community that both inspired and deflated me. But most importantly, because of the process I am a much better community member. And, while it is still painful for me to watch how inept we are as a culture when it comes to difference, I am hopeful about the possibilities of addressing those differences. I have my colleagues at IET to thank for that. I wish this process on all teacher educators.

Sustaining Hope: Knowing That It Matters

It was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole—well grounded in a context where there was little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul.⁴³

On a recent radio show, I heard Rev. Jesse Jackson say, “Hope is a weapon. Hope is a weapon.”⁴¹ His statement resonated with me. When I am feeling hopeful, I believe that I have made the right decision *and* that there will be a positive outcome. When I am hopeful, I am able to take actions that make a difference. Hopelessness, on the other hand, garners a very different response. Instead of believing in my decisions, I second guess myself. Instead of having faith in the outcome, I am pessimistic. Indeed, hope is a weapon. When I am hopeful I am intensely committed to taking actions that make a difference personally and within the community, such that no matter what individuals or groups do, I continue to act. Hope is a weapon that protects us from the violent acts of patriarchy, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and classism that shape our daily lives.

In *Beyond Reflective Competency: Teaching for Audacious Hope-in-Action*, Hicks and I explain that despite creating an antioppressive, transformative curriculum that sharpened our teachers’ reflective, collaborative, and inquiry skills, and evidence that our teachers came to new and more critical insights, our curriculum failed to inspire teachers to take an antioppressive stance in remedying oppressive practices in schools. We believe that teachers could not take an antioppressive stance, or actions, because they failed to understand that “hope and action are inextricably dependent on each other.”⁴⁴ Specifically, “for action to be taken, one must have a hopeful view. And the reverse is also true: For one to be hopeful, action must be taken. Indeed, hope and action are in a symbiotic relationship with each other.”⁴⁵ We created a curriculum that focused on the needed tools for doing antioppressive work and not the needed weapons.

The strength of *Teaching Community* lies in the hope filled personal stories shared by hooks. One particular story of hope stuck with me. In it she describes being the commencement speaker at a conservative school in the South and being booed. She provides a rich description of the experience, citing what she learned. But, what gave me pause was her analysis of the event and the hopefulness she took away from the experience. She writes:

To many onlookers this experience was viewed as a failure of efforts of diversity and inclusion. I saw it as a triumph, first of free speech, which any college must support to be true to its mission.... I had also been empowered by a world of “white male privilege” to speak to masses of white people who probably have never listened to a black female give a lecture about any subject, let alone a Leftist dissident feminist black intellectual.... Just as I spoke in my commencement address about the importance of not merely conforming in college but daring to courageously cling to open-mindedness, to critical thinking, my hope was to embody this courage, this radical openness by my presence. That hope was fully realized.⁴⁶

hooks did not just wish for something to happen, she took action, and despite not having the impact she may have wanted on the majority of the audience, she was inspired by knowing that she had remained true to her beliefs. In doing so, one audience member, Dean Jim Hunt, was positively engaged. She shares his comments, "There is not a week that goes by without my thinking of some of the ideas that were raised."⁴⁷ Despite being afraid, hooks spoke with passion about her convictions and steadied herself for the criticism. In the end, it was a learning experience not just for the audience, but for her as well.

Teacher educators must begin to educate prospective teachers with a sense of audacious hope that sustains them during moments of uncertainty and when they are afraid. In this sense, audacious hope is both an offensive and defensive weapon against despair and disillusionment. Teachers should be just and stand for what is right, even when it is not popular. Because students are involved, we must be willing to take risks if the outcome of the risks improves the lives of others. hooks's belief in the role of the imagination is analogous to this notion of sustaining hope. Speaking of the role of imagination, she writes, "Throughout my teaching career, I have shared with students my beliefs in the power of prophetic imagination, telling them again and again 'that what we cannot imagine we cannot bring into being.'"⁴⁸ Teacher educators must be audaciously hopeful and work to assist prospective teachers to actualize a sense of hope as well. We must fight against the traditions and realities of a demoralized educational system that overshadows any actions taken on the behalf of others, just as hooks did in her commencement speech. Recognizing that the process of self-actualization and working to build communities of solidarity is much harder than we could ever have anticipated, hope will help teachers stay the course. Hope is a weapon that teacher educators must pass on to prospective teachers. If we fail to do so, they will certainly not pass it on to children sitting in their classrooms in the future.

Conclusion

If I were in a different academic setting her works would have merely resonated with me. Luckily, I was given the opportunity to study her books and essays and attempt to apply some of her progressive ideas to my life. In my mind, this is theory meeting practice at the most basic and fundamental level: the individual.⁴⁹

Engaged pedagogy demands that we create spaces that support wholeness and uphold the idea of mind and body as one.⁵⁰ I believe bell hooks has it right. Once you experience engaged pedagogy, education literally becomes an act of freedom. You are free to share your personal story in ways that are significant, in ways that build and sustain communities across differences, and, most importantly, in ways that are hopeful. Watching my young cousin Nicole's enthusiasm about her learning experience at Spelman, an environment where education is an act of freedom, I am nostalgic about my own process. I am also confident that if teacher educators apply the works of bell hooks to their personal and professional lives then we will have

an opportunity to create for all students an engaged pedagogy where theory meets practice. Perhaps, just as important, creating an engaged pedagogy allows teacher educators to sustain themselves and the work they do.

Notes

1. At the time of writing, Nicole S. Barden was a junior English major and Women's Studies minor at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia.
2. Dr. Gloria Wade Gayles, an English professor at the time at Spelman College, told us this in a freshman composition course.
3. Namulundah Florence, *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy: A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Press, 1998).
4. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as an Act of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.
5. *Ibid.*, 14.
6. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
7. Hugh Sockett, and others, eds., *Transforming Teacher Education: Lessons in Professional Development* (New York: Bergin & Garvey Press, 2001), 4.
8. Mezirow and Associates cited in Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 22.
9. *Ibid.* One might conclude that transformation is implied in the NCATE standard 1: Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions. The targeted goal for a teacher candidate disposition reads, "candidates recognize when their own dispositions may need to be adjusted and are able to do so" (NCATE Web site, <http://www.ncate.org>; accessed July 10, 2008). One might argue that the accrediting body desires that candidates are able to negotiate and respond critically as opposed to having their purposes, values, feelings, and meanings gathered uncritically from others.
10. There are departments within schools of education that are committed to an engaged and transformative pedagogy and that support faculty designing such a curriculum. It is my belief that this should be the aim of all schools of education.
11. Julia Brooks, "Sharing Power in the Social Foundations of Education: Risky Emotions as Antecedents to Transformation," (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, Cleveland, Ohio, October 24–28, 2007).
12. Sheryl Cozart, Gretchen Generett, and Paula Price, "Biography as Curriculum: Autobiographical Representations in Preservice Teacher Education," *Vitae Scholastica* (forthcoming).
13. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 18.
14. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970).
15. *Ibid.*, 5.
16. Gretchen Generett and Mark Hicks, "Beyond Reflective Competency: Teaching for Audacious Hope in Action," *Journal of Transformative Education* 2 (2004): 192.
17. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.
18. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
19. Several of hooks's works, including *Killing Rage*, *Talking Back*, and *Ain't I a Woman?* describe her educational experiences.
20. Michele Wallace, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Why America Can't Deal with Black Feminist Intellectuals," *The Village Voice* 40 (45): 19–24.
21. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 16.
22. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.
23. Kevin Kumashiro, "Against Repetition: Addressing Resistance to Anti-Oppressive Change in the Practices of Learning, Teaching, Supervising, and Researching," *Harvard Educational Review* 72(2002): 68.
24. Mark Hicks and Gretchen Generett, "Barriers to Transformative Collaboration for Justice Within Cross-Cultural Communities" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2007), 32.
25. Antonio Darder, William Perry, and Paulo Freire all address inquiry as a significant aspect of development.

26. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 129–130.
27. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).
28. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope; The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
29. Mahatma Gandhi, *Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1964).
30. Vivian May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
31. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 35.
32. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
33. Hicks and Generett, “Barriers to Transformative Collaboration,” 3.
34. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
35. Peter Senge and others, ed., *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (New York: Fifth Discipline Books, 2000), 68.
36. Thomas Nakayama and Judith Martin, *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).
37. Hicks and Generett, “Barriers to Transformative Collaboration for Justice,” 34.
38. *Ibid.*, 32.
39. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 36.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Hicks and Generett, “Barriers to Transformative Collaboration for Justice,” 4.
42. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 16.
43. Jesse Jackson, *Keep Hope Alive* Radio Talk Show, Pittsburgh, PA, January 13, 2008.
44. Generett and Hicks, “Beyond Reflective Competency: Teaching for Audacious Hope in Action,” 199.
45. *Ibid.*, 199.
46. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 194–95.
47. *Ibid.*, 195.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Nicole S. Barden, January 7, 2007.
50. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

6

bell hooks's Children's Literature

Writing to Transform the World at Its Root

CARME MANUEL¹

Children's books are literary texts and, as such, they are "expressions of the values and assumptions of a culture and a significant way of embedding readers in those values and assumptions—persuading them that they are in fact the readers that the texts imply."² The impact of living under the pressure of what bell hooks calls "an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal culture"³ has nefarious consequences for black people. Surrounded by messages which depict blackness as negative, African Americans are victims of processes of shaming. At the crucial time of their early years, when human beings develop a sense of identity, literature can be used as "one of the tools to build images and concepts in the mind of children."⁴ Consequently, African American children's literature is instrumental in the process of encouraging "the African American child to feel a sense of value and self-pride."⁵

bell hooks's children's books are blueprints for a happy life in blackness. If her intellectual contributions have blazed innovative trails in the history of African American letters, her children's stories are even more significant since they are positive interventions aimed at delivering optimistic, hopeful, and reassuring countermessages and counternarratives to very young blacks. *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), *Be Boy Buzz* (2002), *Homemade Love* (2002), and *Skin Again* (2004) nurture the soul of black children so that they can struggle against external and internal racism and the powerful machinery of black shaming.⁶

According to Chanta M. Haywood's research, the origins of African American children's literature date back as far as 1854, though much of its first samples have been overlooked by the critics since they were published in black periodicals and newspapers, such as the *Christian Recorder*. Among the early practitioners around the turn of the twentieth-century, mention must be made of Mrs. A. E. Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and W. E. B. DuBois.⁷ bell hooks's career mirrors that of DuBois in that not only is she a writer of powerful essays and books but she too has shown her fierce interest in children. DuBois, as director of *The Brownies' Book*, and Jessie R. Fauset, as its literary editor, had a program in mind which underpinned their publication: "To inform, educate, and politicize children and their parents and to showcase the achievements of people of color."⁸ As Violet J. Harris explains, DuBois firmly believed that the achievement of these aims would result in "the creation of

a personality...refined colored youth—young African American counterparts of the ‘race men’ and ‘race women’ of the early years of the twentieth century. Such youngsters revered education, exhibited personal and racial pride, and were committed to racial solidarity and uplift.”⁹ Similarly to DuBois’s periodical for children, hooks’s children’s books are profoundly political and are inspired by the urgency of her “militant spirit of racial uplift.”¹⁰

Harris provides a list of writers who have created culturally conscious literature: Lucille Clifton, Tom Feelings, Eloise Greenfield, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, Walter Dean Myers, the late John Steptoe, Mildred Taylor, Brenda Wilkinson, Angela Johnson, Patricia McKissack, Emily Moore, Joyce Carol Thomas, and Camille Yarbrough.¹¹ To this list, however, the name of bell hooks must be added by its own right. In fact, the work done by hooks prior to her writing children’s literature must be considered as a manifesto which explains, interprets, and underpins her involvement in a seemingly minor genre. Her children’s stories comply with the requisites of culturally conscious literature, but what makes them outstanding is the fact that they are firmly anchored in her progressive and holistic educational and political theories. Far from being an innocent playful appendix to her main body of work, her children’s books are part and parcel of those reflections about what it means to be an African American in contemporary United States.

hooks’s corpus has traced the development of black nationalism, the drawbacks of racial integrationist policies, and the lack of motivation to continue militant antiracist resistance since the 1980s. She laments that “there are no critical avenues where any body of critically conscious antiracist readers review and critique this literature to see whether or not it undermines the self-esteem of black children. And there is so little literature aimed at black teen readers that almost any material is deemed acceptable by publishers.”¹² Spurred by her profound sense of social and political commitment to education and the construction of a healthy concept of black self, hooks’s children’s books are literary counterattacks against the texts that are “antiblack or aggressively promoting dysfunction.”¹³ In fact, hooks’s point of departure in composing her children’s stories can be best understood if they are thought of as therapeutic devices. Hugh Crago’s article “Can Stories Heal?” is useful reading because it helps us grasp hooks’s personal concept of children’s literature, her attitude toward it, and the philosophical, social, and cultural foundations which buttress it. Thus, her children’s books fall under the vast umbrella of bibliotherapeutic texts or “therapeutic story-telling” as intervention devices into the contemporary African American reality of the United States.

According to Crago, “bibliotherapy is one of an enormous range of methods for helping human beings in distress.”¹⁴ He explains how preliterate children spontaneously compose songs, chants, monologues, and other forms of phatic expression, in imitation of adult talk, song, and story. In addition to this, when preferred texts are read again and again, they become, according to Crago, “potent shaping influences over the reader’s future self concept and life path.”¹⁵ This is what hooks’s children’s books are intended to become: potentiating devices.

Yet, because of the early age of the target readers of hooks’s books (from 5 to 8 years old), the presence of an adult reader/parents/surrogate parental figure is

highly important, as he or she will become the mediator between the text and the child and the helper in the eliciting constructive self-help. Children will read these texts but the books will most probably be read to them. Then it stands to reason that adult readers (whether they are parents or surrogate parental figures) improve not only their literacy skills but also their critical consciousness skills so that they can become efficient readers to their children.¹⁶ Parents/adult readers become, then, mediators of meaning, decoders of the cultural and ideological content of a seemingly innocent neutral text. D. L. Chapman underlines the fact that parents must learn the importance of involving their children in book-reading interactions and recognize that "the parent holds the key to unlocking the meaning represented by the text."¹⁷ Such as it is, reading these books aloud to children can become what Carol D. Lee calls a "routine practice...within the cultural life of communities that schools can draw upon to assist students in constructing concepts in a given domain the schools seek to teach." According to Lee, "the challenge is to find that powerful match between the contours of the knowledge that is socially constructed in the community as well as the family context and those constructs introduced in the context of the classroom."¹⁸ Because of the interactive nature of knowledge, parents/adult readers can actually help bridge the gap between the knowledge structures taught in school and the knowledge structures constructed within nonschool social settings in a process which Lee describes as a "cross-fertilization of concepts and knowledge."¹⁹ In this same line, Daniel D. Hade explains, "accounting for how race, class, and gender mean in children's stories cannot be a task just for the critic."²⁰ Sharing Peter Hollindale's opinion in his "Ideology and the Children's Book," Hade states that "the task of adults is to teach children how to read, so that to the limits of each child's capacity, children will not be at the mercy of what they read. Perhaps if children can read the ideology in their books, they will be able to read it in other areas of their lives."²¹ Adult readers must then teach black children how to read children's stories, to become critical readers and thus critical thinkers. This is the reason why hooks's children's books call for adult critical readers sensitive to the author's lifelong racial concerns and her will to promote healthy self-esteem and a firm sense of self. Naturally, her children's volumes revolve around four main themes which hooks has critically and insightfully debated in her theoretical essays: standards of beauty, black masculinity, power of love, and meaning of skin color.

In hooks's first title, *Happy to Be Nappy* (illustrator, Chris Raschka, 1999), she talks about hair and the multiplicity of its styles (nappy, plaited, long, short, natural, twisted, etc.). In *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (chapter 31), she talks about hair and explains its ritual in the kitchen: "For each of us getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be women. It is a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood—a rite of passage."²²

In *Happy to Be Nappy* hair becomes here a celebration of African American identity. The ritual of combing goes back to hooks's own childhood and to beauty traditions in African American cultures. "Doing Hair" is recreated as a communal female ritual to exchange life stories and build up a sense of bonding sisterhood. The book is a direct message to black girls to transcend mainstream standards of

beauty and accept themselves as they are. In other words, it is hooks's attempt to reinforce self-esteem with poetic words. As she explains throughout her texts, she bases her thoughts on love on Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. Fromm defines love "as an action informed by care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility,"²³ and she believes that "female self-love begins with self-acceptance."²⁴ Yet, this self-acceptance is daily undermined by the society African Americans live in where they confront "negative images of blackness." This is the main reason why "it takes courage and vigilance to create a context where self-love can emerge."²⁵ For hooks, "to create an environment that is permeated by a love ethic"²⁶ is to engage in a process of "loving blackness" which becomes a form of "political resistance which transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life."²⁷

Kobena Mercer has highlighted the fact that styling of hair is a universal cultural practice. The hair of one's head, according to Mercer, "is never a straightforward biological 'fact,' since it is "almost always...worked upon by human hands." These actions "socialize hair, making it the medium of significant 'statements' about self and society."²⁸ In *Rock My Soul* hooks talks about how "militant antiracist political struggles placed the issue of self-esteem for black folks on the agenda. And it took the form of primarily discussing the need for positive images. The slogan 'black is beautiful' was popularized in an effort to undo the negative racist iconography and representations of blackness that had been an accepted norm in visual culture."²⁹ Among the manifold ways in which blacks were depicted in terms of distorted representations, hairstyles were often the target of scorn and derision. "Natural hairstyles," then, were offered "to counter the negative stereotype that one could be beautiful only if one's hair was straight and not kinky. 'Happy to be nappy' was a popular slogan among militant black liberation groups. Even black folks whose hair was not naturally kinky found ways to make their hair look nappy to be part of the black-is-beautiful movement."³⁰

hooks has explained the genesis of her *Happy to be Nappy* in at least two of her works: *Salvation* (2000) and *Rock My Soul* (2003). In both books she stresses how the cultural thrust of *Happy to be Nappy* is different from that of other black children's stories on hair, specifically from that of the celebrated *Nappy Hair* (Knopf, 1997) by African American writer Carolivia Herron, whose main purpose in writing the book was "to show the power and beauty of African American oral and epic poetry."³¹ *Nappy Hair* is a celebration of black hair told in the traditional call and response design of African American storytelling. In November 1998 the book became the issue of hot controversy when Ruth Sherman, a Brooklyn, New York, white teacher, was denounced by members of the African American community for reading the book to her class of black and Hispanic children.

Yet, hooks's perception of Herron and her work seems slightly different with the passage of time. In 2000, hooks qualifies the act of the "young white Brooklyn schoolteacher, seemingly well-meaning...a perfect example of misguided kindness."³² In *Rock My Soul*, hooks retells this incident, but now, three years later, her reading of Herron's book and her interpretation of the controversy generated from the critics of African American parents show acutely what Peter Nodelman

in "Fear of Children's Literature" (1997) explains as "repressive literature": "We see literature, all literature, as a means of enmeshing children in repressive ideology... children's literature is best understood as a means by which adults claim power over children and force them to accept our repressive versions of who they really are."³³ For hooks, Herron's book embodies now what Nodelman calls "repressive ideologies in apparently harmless texts,"³⁴ since "all children's books always represent adult ideas of childhood—and inevitably, therefore, work to impose adult ideas about childhood on children."³⁵

Hook's books—of which *Happy to be Nappy* is an excellent example—are acts of resistance against the assaults of patriarchal white culture. In fact, they are acts of decolonization. For her, low self-esteem may be conducive to self-sabotage: "To change the effects of low self-esteem related to body image, representations of blackness must change on all levels in our society. And in those instances where we cannot change representations, we need to be critically vigilant, exercising our right to boycott products, to turn off our television sets, to send magazines back to publishers."³⁶ *Happy to be Nappy* exemplifies hooks's intent, "not to follow the usual routine of books marketed to black children and write the usual story that tells them how bad they are but that they should love themselves."³⁷

Her second title, *Be Boy Buzz* (illustrator, Chris Raschka, 2002), celebrates boyhood by casting a look at a boy's day with the tones of a be-bop jazz riff. This is also an affirming text which underscores the beauty and happiness of being a black boy. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (chapter 3 "Schooling Black Males"), hooks explains the genesis of this text: "Committed to creating books that represent young black males and place them at the center of universal stories, I wrote a children's book called *Be Boy Buzz*, which is a positive representation of the holistic selfhood of boys. The boys represented are black."³⁸

As in her previous text, hooks has firm theoretical foundations for her new title. In *The Will to Change* she declares her aim when creating male characters: "To counter patriarchal representations of men as being without feeling, in both the books I write for adults and those I write for children, I have endeavored to create images of men that demonstrate their beauty and integrity of spirit."³⁹ hooks defines patriarchy as "the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation."⁴⁰ She, however, alerts against the essentialistic conflation of men with patriarchy since "women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking and action as men."⁴¹ Terrence Real uses the phrase "psychological patriarchy" to describe the patriarchal thinking common to females and males.⁴² It is for this reason that hooks's book also addresses female headed households and is aimed at being read by mothers. And this is so because "mothers in patriarchal culture silence the wild spirit in their sons, the spirit of wonder and playful tenderness, for fear their sons will be weak, will not be prepared to be macho men, real men, men other men will envy and look up to."⁴³

She recognizes that the lack of a concentrated study of boyhood on the part of feminist theory and practice has been a "tremendous failing," a study which might offer "guidelines and strategies for alternative masculinity and ways of thinking about maleness."⁴⁴ To make up for this "tremendous failing," hooks offers her own

contribution: *Be Boy Buzz*. As in the case of her previous children's books, she explains how she was awakened to the need of writing a book for boys:

Shopping for books for my nephew first alerted me to the absence of progressive literature for boys. In my first children's book with male characters, *Be Boy Buzz*, I wanted to celebrate boyhood without reinscribing patriarchal norms. I wanted to write a text that would just express love for boys. It is a book aimed at little boys. This book strives to honor the holistic well-being of boys and to express love of them whether they are laughing, acting out, or just sitting still.⁴⁵

As a visionary feminist, hooks's obligation and mission is undoubtedly to devote herself to "one of the first revolutionary acts of visionary feminism" which is "to restore maleness and masculinity as an ethical biological category divorced from the dominator model."⁴⁶ Patriarchal masculinity must be rejected and replaced by a model of "feminist masculinity" which means that maleness must be defined as "a state of being rather than as performance."⁴⁷ The way to protect the emotional lives of boys is to challenge patriarchal culture. hooks believes that, until that culture changes, it is urgent to create "the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely, without being forced to conform to patriarchal masculine visions."⁴⁸ *Be Boy Buzz* becomes then a textual sanctuary against the "psychic slaughter"⁴⁹ perpetrated by patriarchal assaults on the emotional life of boys. Hence, the book is a "work of love" which reclaims masculinity and does not allow it to "be held hostage to patriarchal domination."⁵⁰

Homemade Love (illustrator Shane W. Evans, 2002) is the girl's version of *Be Boy Buzz*. Here love can overcome any problem, especially fear of darkness by young girls before going to sleep. Girlpie, already appearing in *Happy to Be Nappy*, reappears surrounded by her loving parents. The book turns out to be much more than a bedtime story. In fact, it aims to instill a sense of security that originates in familial love. Rooting her ideas of love in those of Martin Luther King, hooks believes that "love transforms with redemptive power. ...Love is profoundly political,"⁵¹ and its transformative power is "the foundation of all meaningful social change."⁵²

hooks has repeatedly emphasized through her writings that she is witness to a profound spiritual crisis (dehumanization, diminished capacity to love, internalized racism, and self-hatred). Also, she believes that "to heal our wounded communities, which are diverse and multilayered, we must return to a love ethic."⁵³ This is so since "one measure of the crisis black people are experiencing is lovelessness." Because of this, "it should be evident that we need a body of literature, both sociological and psychological work, addressing the issue of love among black people, its relevance to political struggle, its meaning in our private lives."⁵⁴ Moreover, she sees the necessity to build "an entire body of work, both serious scholarship and popular material, focusing on black self-love."⁵⁵

The fundamental space to build black love is, for hooks, the homeplace. She declares that "our struggles to end domination must begin where we live, in the communities we call home. It is there that we experience our power to create revolutions, to make life-transforming change."⁵⁶ Against all historical odds, African

Americans have traditionally constructed the homeplace as "a site of resistance and liberation struggle" no matter how poor its physical realization was.⁵⁷ Brutal oppression and racism were left dangling at a threshold which treasured strategies for existential confrontation. Against the disintegration of African American family life, patriarchal domination, hooks writes a book about a child who is raised in a loving home by both father and mother, revising the much publicized black "dysfunctional" family environment. "Black folks need love in the house. And the presence of love will serve to stabilize and sustain bonds."⁵⁸ In *Homemade Love*, hooks reimagines the family as a place of resistance and reconfigures the emotional site called "home and family."

hooks's latest book, *Skin Again* (illustrator, Chris Raschka, 2004), introduces children to the question of race as an idea created by society: "the skin I'm in will always be just a covering./It cannot tell my story./If you want to know who I am/you have got to come/inside."⁵⁹ The book tries to highlight the importance of abolishing all types of barriers to establish personal relationships. As such, *Skin Again* is an act of decolonizing the minds of African Americans so that "every black person would learn to stop judging others on the basis of skin color."⁶⁰ The reason why she addresses a book on this topic to children is because "tragically, in the midst of state-legitimized racial apartheid, in predominantly black communities everywhere, the intimate terrorism of the color caste is enacted. Children are its most vulnerable victims."⁶¹

hooks explains how racialism (a practice which holds that the physical differences between races are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral differences) became the ideology that supported the brutal dehumanization of black folks on the basis of skin color. For hooks:

...the most obvious internalization of shame that impacted on the self-esteem of black folks historically and continues to the present day is the shame about appearance, skin color, body shape, and hair texture. Had white colonizers chosen to exploit and oppress black people without stigmatizing appearance, the psychological trauma, endured by slaves would not continue to reenact itself in similar forms today.⁶²

Skin color itself became the mark of status. It is in *Salvation* where hooks specifically explores the negative impact of color caste systems on children and the depth of the psychological traumas caused at an early age: "Children degrade each other on the basis of skin color because they learn from adults that this is acceptable. Whether it be a light-skinned child lording it over a darker peer or a group of dark-skinned children mocking and ridiculing a fair-skinned peer, the intended outcome, to make that person ashamed of their physical features, is the same. It wounds the child's spirit, no matter their skin color."⁶³ hooks testifies to the urgency to praise all kinds of skin color to fight against internalized self-hatred, a fact that affects African Americans more harshly now in a racially integrated society because the mass media still publicize openly the idea of blackness as equal to inferiority. hooks's attitude is informed by her commitment to challenge and change "attitudes towards beauty in the consciousness of black folks that had been shaped by white

supremacist thinking.”⁶⁴ *Skin Again* celebrates precisely the beauty of blackness and calls for black self-acceptance.

Together with hooks’s texts, the illustrations of her four books must also be mentioned. Artists Chris Raschka, Caldecott winner, and Shane W. Evans provide images which go beyond the basic purpose of illustrating the writer’s words. They help visualize a political message in attractive forms. hooks has not only left vestiges of her children’s writing in her essays but also of her deep concern for the visual components of her books.

Perry Nodelman explains that because we assume that pictures are iconic signs, they “do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects *as* the pictures depict them—to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualisation of it.”⁶⁵ “Indeed, this dynamic is the essence of picture books. The pictures ‘illustrate’ the texts—that is, they purport to show us what is meant by the words, so that we come to understand the objects and actions the words refer to in terms of the qualities of the images that accompany them—the world outside the book in terms of the visual images within it.” In fact, “in persuading us that they do represent the actual world in a simple and obvious fashion, picture books are particularly powerful deceivers.” Furthermore, “the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced—in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture.”⁶⁶ Nodelman declares that “picture books can and do often encourage children to take for granted views of reality that many adults find objectionable. It is for this reason above all that we need to make ourselves aware of the complex significations of the apparently simple and obvious words and pictures” of any book.⁶⁷

Art in children’s books, then, should be viewed from a twofold perspective which includes the aesthetic and the ideological. Tom Feelings, as a writer and illustrator, also explains how “books are wonderful tools, and art for children can affect and has the ability to intensify children’s perceptions of reality and stimulate their imagination in a certain way. They can also teach racism and reinforce self-hatred and stereotypes.... Art, like literature, has the power to move beyond the limits of facts to a deeper understanding that is personal and emotional.”⁶⁸ In the same vein, Joseph H. Schwarcz and Chave Schwarcz argue that “illustrations have a psychological effect upon children, that the illustrations which children encounter in literature teach them how to deal with problems in their lives, how to model their lives, how to become adults.”⁶⁹

For hooks, the books’ representations—written during the 1980s and 1990s (in some cases by African Americans) and addressed to black children—share “the racist iconography of the nineteenth century” since “much of the children’s literature published since the seventies with black children as the perceived audience reinforces the racist assumption that black children are really mini adults” and “illustrations in books aimed at young black readers usually depict them looking like adults in children’s bodies or depict them without eyes or mouths, resembling cartoon characters rather than real people.”⁷⁰

Jacque Roethler also attests to the importance of images and explains the effect of illustrations on black children in America.⁷¹ According to Roethler, the formation of identity is a crisis and for black children in the United States this becomes complicated as they must also define themselves in terms of their cultural heritage. "One of the ways in which black children in America create their schemata is through the illustrations they encounter in the literature to which they are exposed as children."⁷² "The images these children soak up remain with them for the rest of their lives."⁷³ Roethler explains then how Joseph H. Schwarcz in his *Ways of the Illustrator: Visual Communication in Children's Literature* stresses the function of children's books and their illustrations as forces for "humanization": "Such is the nature of the superior aesthetic message that it influences the whole child...it develops [the child's] self-perception and his comprehension of the world he lives in, his ability to understand his own intimate experience and to relate more meaningfully to others."⁷⁴ For Schwarcz, the children's books and their illustrations have the power to influence the adult which the child will become.⁷⁵ Schwarcz mentions two other phenomena: emotive response and cumulative effect. Concerning emotive response, Schwarcz says that "illustrated stories bring to the child's subconsciousness ideas which would be difficult to represent at a conscious level."⁷⁶ Concerning cumulative effect, he writes that: "being repeatedly exposed to images will create a lasting impression; negative or positive images will become part of the child's schemata."⁷⁷ Roethler then goes on examining what happens to children of minority cultures reading illustrations in children's books. She argues, "if negative images of black people appear in children's literature, it is bound to do damage to children trying to understand their place in society." In fact, "much of the work of African American parents is undoing damage wrought by these images."⁷⁸

Where I must part with Roethler, however, is when she argues for the necessity of having black artists to illustrate black children's books. In fact, Chris Raschka's illustrations for bell hooks's volumes show that "creating positive images of black children for black (and all) children that produce strong, positive responses"⁷⁹ is not necessarily linked to the illustrator's ethnicity but to his or her sensitivity and skillful art. hooks explains her interaction with Raschka when giving images to her words in *Be Boy Buzz* and her demands on the illustrations based on the foundations of her racial philosophy:

The illustrator for the book is a white male. When the first illustrations were shown to me, I noticed that many of the images were of black boys in motion, running, jumping, playing; I requested images of black boys being still, enjoying solitude, reading. The image of a boy reading was particularly important to include because it is clear that this society sends black male children the message that they do not need to be readers. In some black families where reading is encouraged in girl children, a boy who likes to read is perceived as suspect, as on the road to being a "sissy". Certainly as long as black people buy into the notion of patriarchal manhood, which says that real men are all body and no mind, black boys who are cerebral, who want to read, and who love books will risk being ridiculed as not manly.⁸⁰

As on previous occasions, hooks also provides a rationale for the illustrations, as in the case of *Homemade Love*. In *Rock My Soul*, she tells about the genesis of the text showing the agency and control she exerts on her books as marketable products:

No matter how many two-parent black families abound, more than ever before in our nation's history when the image of the black family is depicted it is almost always as a single-parent family. Recently, I worked with the publishers of one of my children's books on the illustration for the cover. The book was about a two-parent family and the love they give their daughter. However, the cover image that they had chosen was of a mother hugging her daughter. When I inquired about the image, suggesting that it did not convey what this book was about, the group of liberal young white people who had made this decision could not give cogent reasons for their cover choice. They expressed fondness for the image.

As a cultural critic I write endlessly about the ways blackness is represented and the power representations have to shape our sense of our self. And to me this image, though beautiful, conveyed a different message from the book. Luckily, I was in the presence of a group of people who were willing to listen to my concerns. I suggested that it is important to have positive images of single parents but it is just as important to have positive images of two-parent black families. The latter are harder to find. And since that was what my book was about, together we chose a different image—a mother and a father holding the hands of their beloved daughter.⁸¹

To conclude, it seems clear that, similarly to the rest of her writing, hooks's four children's books display her political agenda and represent her new forward steps into political commitment and her active engagement in a heroic tradition born to erase the racist representations of the black Other. These are books written to empower young African Americans, to transform them into enlightened witnesses and critical vigilant watchers, to instill a sense of value and self-pride, and to reaffirm positive images of identity and community. hooks's children's literature is thoroughly political and, as such, emblematic of her definite attempt to change the world at its root.

Notes

1. The research leading to the publication of this essay was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the European Regional Development Fund (Project HUM2007/FILO).
2. Perry Nodelman, "Fear of Children's Literature: What's Left (or Right) After Theory?" in *Reflections of Change: Children's Literature Since 1945*, ed. Sandra L. Beckett (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 9.
3. hooks, *Rock my Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 136.
4. Nancy Tolson, "Making Books Available: The Role of Early Libraries, Librarians, and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children's Literature," *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (1998), 9.
5. Ibid., 9.
6. hooks, *Happy to be Nappy*, illustrator Chris Raschka (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books

- for Children, 1999); hooks, *Be Boy Buzz*, illustrator Chris Raschka (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2002); hooks, *Homemade Love*, illustrator Shane W. Evans (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2002); hooks, *Skin Again*, illustrator Chris Raschka (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2004).
7. As far as children's literature is concerned, DuBois's most important contribution was the formation of the DuBois and Dill Publishing Company with Augustus G. Dill. DuBois and Dill engaged in the publication of *The Brownies' Book*, and of two biographies, Elizabeth Ross Haynes's *Unsung Heroes* (1921) and Julia Henderson's *A Child Story of Dunbar* (1921).
 8. Harris, "African American Children's Literature," 546.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 11.
 11. Harris, "African American Children's Literature," 550.
 12. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 104.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Hugo Crago, "Can Stories Heal?" in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 168.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. Many researchers and pedagogues have highlighted the significance of reading to black children. In "The Importance of Reading to Black Children," the editors of *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 3 (Spring 1994) explained that a study conducted in the early 1990s by the Center for Demography and Ecology and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, revealed "a startling statistic: In married couple families, approximately 31 percent of all white fathers of children under five years of age read to their children almost every day compared with only 5 percent of black fathers" (12). According to the survey, in families in which parents were living together, black and white mothers read to their children equally as often. The black reading deficit was entirely on the paternal side. African American educator, Dr. Henry Ponder, president of Fisk University in Nashville, pointed out that the study might ignore the fact that in a large number of nontraditional families in the black community there is a male figure, other than a father, who plays a surrogate role. And also the tradition of black oral storytelling has to be taken into account as an equivalent intellectual stimulation. African American Dorothy Strickland, the State of New Jersey Professor of Reading at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, believed that these results were "regrettable but not surprising" since they were "consistent with a large body of research supporting the positive relationship between storybook reading and children's literacy development. It also corresponds with research indicating that black children tend to do less well in literacy than do children of most other ethnic groups." The benefits of parents reading aloud to their children are many. According to Strickland, this is a shared experience, which results in talking about text. This talk "evolves into some very natural and highly effective teaching and learning." And most important, "parents are actually demonstrating, rather than simply stating, their interest in books and in the child." For this researcher, "one of the best things we can do as individuals interested in the literacy development of black children is to foster the value of reading aloud to them early and often."
 17. D. L. Chapman, "Let's Read Another One," in *Roles in Literacy: A New Perspective*, ed. D. R. Tovey and J. E. Kerber (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1986), 12.
 18. Carol D. Lee, "Big Picture Talkers/Words Walking Without Masters: The Instructional Implications of Ethnic Voices for an Expanded Literacy," *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 292.
 19. Lee, "Big Picture Talkers/Words Walking Without Masters," 293. Patricia A. Edwards in "Involving Parents in Building Reading Instruction for African American Children" also highlights the importance of parental involvement in the preparation of reading instruction in the early grades (*Theory into Practice*, 34, no. 4 [Autumn, 1992]: 21–34). Edwards explains how "a number of researchers have recognized that many children, especially low-income African-American children, have limited experience with books and they are divided as far as fundamental importance of parents involvement in reading aloud to them. Some question efforts to make up for this lack at school and still question whether classroom storybook reading experience substitutes for the

more intimate one-to-one interactions at home" (351). Edwards, who developed the book-reading program called *Parents as Partners in Reading*, suggests that "low-income African-American parents not only have the right to know that sharing books with their children may be the most powerful and significant predictor of school achievement, they have the right to receive assistance in how to participate in book-reading interactions with their young children" (351). For more than thirty years, researchers have been trying to explain why African American children continue to lag behind white children in reading achievement. It is no secret that parents are their children's first teachers, especially their children's first teachers of reading. Edwards quotes Edgar G. Epps, Foreword, in R. M. Clark, *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), ix–xiii. Epps notes that "the family is the basic institution through which children learn who they are, where they fit into society, and what kinds of future they are likely to experience" (ix). And she also cites R. M. Clark who argues that: "It is not class position that determines a family's ability to support their children learning, rather it is the quality of life within the home that makes the difference" (xiii). Diana T. Slaughter and Edgar G. Epps in "The Home Environment and Academic Achievement of Black American Children and Youth: An Overview" (*The Journal of Negro Education*, 56, no.1 [Winter, 1987]: 3–20) explain how decisive parental influences are on early learning and achievement and the importance of the home environment: "Even before nursery school, the family shapes the child through stimulation of his verbal, conversational skills and creation of affective bonds that may often be transformed into a press for evidence of independence and achievement as the child matures. Parents are, in effect, the child's earliest teachers, not simply because they have the 'right' to be, but because they do, in their priorities, expectancies, and behaviors, influence the course of the child's achievement development" (6). Diane Scott-Jones in "Mother-as-Teacher in the Families of High- and Low-Achieving Low-Income Black First-Graders" (*The Journal of Negro Education*, 56, no. 1 [Winter, 1987]: 21–34) argues that "young children's experiences within their own families are important for their cognitive development and school achievement (22). "It is assumed that knowledge and understanding grow out of social interactions with others. Adult caregivers may function as 'supportive others,' serving as regulators and interrogators of the young child's behavior. From their social interactions with supportive, knowledgeable others, children gradually internalize the regulatory, interrogative role and are able to perform the supportive-other function for themselves" (22).

20. Daniel D. Hade, "Reading Children's Literature Multiculturally," in *Reflections of Change: Children's Literature Since 1945*, ed. Sandra L. Beckett (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 121.
21. Ibid.
22. hooks, *Bone Black*, 92.
23. hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (Perennial: New York, 2003), 85.
24. Ibid., 107.
25. hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (London: The Women's Press, 2000), 65.
26. Ibid., 70.
27. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 20.
28. Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trihn T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York; London, 1990), 248–49.
29. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 2.
30. Ibid.
31. See <http://www.canton.edu/can/can-start.taf?`page=news-004Spring-herron>
32. hooks, *Salvation*, 80.
33. Nodelman, "Fear of Children's Literature," 4.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 8.
36. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 57.
37. Ibid., 54.
38. hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 39.

39. hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 136.
40. Ibid., 17.
41. Ibid., 23.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 137.
44. Ibid., 38–39.
45. Ibid., 53–54.
46. Ibid., 114.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 54.
49. Ibid., 66.
50. Ibid., 115.
51. hooks, *Salvation*, 16.
52. Ibid., 17.
53. hooks, *Salvation*, 4.
54. Ibid., 5.
55. Ibid., 92.
56. hooks, *The Will to Change*, 172.
57. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 43.
58. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 134.
59. hooks, *Skin Again*. Illustrated by Chris Raschka (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2004), 12–13.
60. hooks, *Salvation*, 72.
61. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 41.
62. Ibid., 37.
63. hooks, *Salvation*, 61.
64. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 44.
65. Perry Nodelman, “Decoding the Images: Illustration and Picture Books” in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 72.
66. Ibid., 73.
67. Ibid.
68. Tom Feelings, “Illustration is My Form, the Black Experience My Story and My Content,” *The Advocate* 4 (1985): 73.
69. Joseph H. Schwarcz and Chava Schwarcz, *The Picture Book Comes of Age: Looking at Childhood through the Art of Illustration* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1991). Cited in Jacque Roethler, “Reading in Color: Children's Book Illustrations and Identity Formation for Black Children in the United States.” *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (1998): 95.
70. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 103.
71. Roethler, “Reading in Color,” 95.
72. Ibid., 96.
73. Ibid.
74. Joseph H. Schwarcz, *Ways of the Illustrator: Visual Communication in Children's Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982), 195.
75. Roethler, “Reading in Color,” 97.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 99.
80. hooks, *We Real Cool*, 40.
81. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, 119–20.

II

The Dynamics of Race and Gender

7

Talking Back

bell hooks, Feminism, and Philosophy

DONNA-DALE L. MARCANO

My most important encounter with the work of bell hooks came at the beginning of my graduate school career. I started graduate school with excitement and enthusiasm enough to last me through my graduate school career—or so I thought. By the end of my first two semesters, the dawning of an ever-present gloom and anxiety hovered around me like the cartoon character's Pigen's dust cloud. I was no stranger to gloom and anxiety; however, this felt like a fight for my life in which my enemy was unknown to me. Me, as my own worst enemy, I understood, but this sense of fighting for my life appeared to me to be more than just me, yet the enemy did not seem be a particular other as far as I could tell. It was then that I read *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). It had been a gift; a book I hadn't read yet and one I did not suspect would be important to my graduate education in philosophy.¹ Needless to say, hooks articulated the pain and strength of my past as well as the pain and victories I was yet to face.

In the introduction to *Talking Back*, hooks revealed that the writing of this particular book presented a challenge at almost every turn: "Always something would get in the way—relationships ending, exile, loneliness, some recently discovered pain—and I had to hurt again, hurt myself all the way away from writing, re-writing, putting the book together."² Reflecting on why the writing was so difficult, hooks realized that her commitment "to doing things differently," to reveal "personal stuff," to disclose Gloria Jean had much to do with the difficulty of writing. Revealing the personal in speech and in writing is always an opportunity of risk. However, hooks describes with much clarity the punishment that black women face in revealing the personal. From childhood friends—"do we have to go that deep?"—to graduate school and a first publication formed and informed by white authority—"do we want to hear what you are saying?"—that reveal the personal risks and the punishment of not being heard, of loss, and of isolation.³ It was, however, the writing of the personal rather than the academic, which proved most painful and the most radical.

hooks's foray into the personal as the radical and revolutionary, as what is necessary for those who have been and are oppressed and silenced, for those intellectuals marginalized in the academic world, provides a philosophical method upon which black women and feminist philosophers can approach their work. Philosophy is the domain from which the personal is supposedly removed. Thus, much of the

work of feminist philosophers and the work of men who write on race often appear as separate structural or analytic analyses of each of these systems of domination. For black women philosophers concerned with their experience as both raced and gendered, and sometimes classed, the pain, loss, alienation experienced within academic institutions and rooted in their experience, subjectivity, and identity often serves to limit the potential for resistance in their writing. This chapter attempts to argue that the work of hooks, her style of writing, her integration of the personal and public, as well as her healthy understanding of its separation, can be thought of as a philosophical position and method. As hooks states, "We make the revolutionary history, telling the past as we have learned it mouth-to-mouth, telling the present as we see, know, and feel it in our hearts and with our words...in thinking feminist, thinking black."⁴

To be more specific, I argue that hooks's corpus can be and should be considered a phenomenology of a black feminist consciousness. Phenomenology as it has been institutionalized through the discipline of philosophy remains the domain of men such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Phenomenology as a philosophical method can be simply defined as "the analysis of the *a priori* and necessary structures of any possible consciousness."⁵ Two women can be noted as attempting a work of phenomenology, Simone de Beauvoir and Sandra Bartky, both of whom used phenomenology to articulate the particular consciousness of women. To be sure, these women are not frequently taught in any standard phenomenology class. What makes these women's work different from standard, institutionalized phenomenology is that they take seriously the ways that sexism in philosophy and in our social reality shape the consciousness of women. In effect, they understand that consciousness is already embodied, historical, and located. Phenomenology's ruse of a pure consciousness coming to consciousness of self and other becomes, in the work of de Beauvoir and Bartky, particularized and most importantly entails explicit accounts of transformation. It is in this context, a context dominated by white men, where embodiment figures as *any* (abstract) body, where "the historical" figures as the West, where locatedness figures as Europe that I bring bell hooks to the table. And it is in the spirit of existential phenomenology best represented by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir that I find hooks's work to be best understood. I make this claim with some reservation because Sartre is often taught in the United States as a raging individualist, an extremist of individual freedom who espoused a moral voluntaristic relativism: "I can do what I want to do; I can be whatever I want to be...today, tomorrow, anytime." Instead of the purely transcendental ego which informs this position, I emphasize the tension between transcendence and facticity that underscores existential phenomenology's apprehension of any particular consciousness.

This chapter cannot and does not offer an overarching analysis of the whole of hooks's corpus. Additionally, this chapter does not highlight the number or variety of philosophers, philosophical discourse and its discursive practices which hooks utilizes in her writing. As an obviously prolific reader and writer, the link between hooks and philosophy remains far beyond the many philosophers' names and insights that grace her texts. Instead, this chapter's starting point is the theme of

coming to voice, self-recovery, and critical feminist consciousness articulated in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. hooks reminds us that while the ideas of coming to voice or finding one's voice appear clichéd due to assumptions of a common women's voice or critiqued for its primacy of speech, coming to voice remains relevant to women in exploited and oppressed groups.⁶

To understand hooks's work in the context of the subdiscipline of phenomenology in the Continental tradition of academic philosophy is important to a larger project of discovering the philosophical relevance of black women feminist writers who have struggled, negotiated, and found liberation as a response to their awareness of the woman problem and race problem, both of which are problems that present fundamental challenges to "mainstream" philosophy's representation of itself as well as its discussion of its content. Black women and their writings have traditionally been left out of the diversity of philosophical voices, which litter and contaminate the myth of the unified philosophical canon, what George Yancy named as the "philosophical oracle voice."⁷ The philosophical oracle voice suggests the metaphorical and real space inhabited by the "insider" of philosophy. As Yancy argues, the philosophical oracle, the insiders, are those:

who regulate and police both physical and discursive spaces, are those who see themselves as protecting the "purity" of philosophical borders, those who protect, through imperial superimposition, a certain conception of philosophy, those who sustain and reinforce familiar ways of understanding philosophical problems, defining philosophical problems, and approaching and addressing them.... The oracle voice is godlike, supposedly surveying the world from the aspect of eternity. The oracle voice is presumed self-grounded and unconditioned; it speaks from nowhere, because it is deemed outside the flux of history, context, multiplicity, and heteroglossia.⁸

The philosophical oracle "resists seeing itself as different and particularistic," as Yancy points out. In addition, however, the philosophical oracle apprehends voices at its margins and the questions and problems which arise from the living in those margins to be so particular as to bear no important consequence on how one does, makes, and understands philosophy.⁹ Thus, while black women's writings, even those of bell hooks, may be used for some "insight" into black women's lives or experience (sparingly and only if one is lucky in a feminist philosophy class), these writings are not taken to create, follow, inhabit, or influence philosophical method and structure.

Toward a Phenomenology of Black Feminist Consciousness

I suspect it is no coincidence that hooks titled a book of essays, *Talking Back*, in which she admits self-disclosure and constructs analyses of feminism, intimacy, education, pedagogy, and political commitment to name a few. The very notion of "talking back" implicitly signifies the relation between the authorized and unauthorized. One knows not talk back to one's parent; one knows not to talk back to the police (especially if you are black or poor); one struggles to talk back to one's (predominantly white

male) professors and colleagues. Talking back suggests rebelliousness and resistance on the part of the unauthorized. Just as importantly, talking back can mark the act of transformation of the unauthorized in the discovery of their authority, their coming to voice. "Talking back" then reveals the authority of the unauthorized and signifies that one has one's own mind, thoughts, and perspectives.

hooks describes "talking back" in her early childhood life in a world where children were meant to be seen and not heard as "speaking as an equal to an authority figure...daring to disagree and sometimes...just...having an opinion."¹⁰ Talking back as a female child in this world did not mean that women were silent. It is, in fact, the speaking of the women in the home sphere "giving orders, making threats, fussing" where the men appear absent or silent and the language spoken by the women seemed "so rich, so poetic that it felt...like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate."¹¹ hooks distinguishes the silence of the "sexist right speech of womanhood" which white feminists often link to women's submission to white male patriarchy from the "right speech of womanhood" that constrained black women's speech.¹² In this world, the world of black women, women speak but their voices were nonetheless "often the soliloquy, the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear...the talk that is simply not listened to."¹³ Thus, the speech of mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and their friends, while not silenced, remained a kind of "background noise," even as it asserted itself in the giving of orders or the making of threats. Talking back in this context could be said to be a loud but powerless speech silenced in its insignificance despite its burden of keeping structure within various private spheres. For hooks, her clearest perception of dialogue in which speech is shared and recognized in its intimacy, intensity, joyfulness, loudness, tenderness, and wit, and thus filled with the power of discourse, occurred among the black women in her life and was unlike the speech which occurred between mother and child or between mother and male authority.¹⁴

By understanding the varied ways in which black women's speech is confined to background noise, we can understand once again the differences which many though not all black women face in moving from the talking back of their mothers and the transformative talking back of a feminist consciousness. Indeed, hooks articulates the "talking back that falls silent" which black women may face not only in the domestic sphere but in the sphere of feminist thinking, in the public sphere of black feminist thinking, writing, or activism.

Sandra Bartky identifies two structural features of current social reality, though while not sufficient for the conditions for the emergence of feminist consciousness are nonetheless necessary for its emergence: the existence of contradictions in social reality and "the presence, due to these same contradictions, of concrete circumstances which would permit a significant alteration in the status of women."¹⁵ hooks's description of black women's speech in her home life exemplifies the contradictions with which many black women struggle. For many black women the option of submission to be silent is not an option. We are often exposed to the need to speak up in the daily context of the home and public spheres. In *When Chickensheads Come Home to Roost*, Joan Morgan insightfully points to the stereotypical

behavior of the “strongblackwoman” that many young black women assume. Not uncomfortable with speaking out, the “strongblackwoman” nonetheless is merely an angry, impotent voice, forged in the slave history of black women’s need to restrain vulnerability in a world in which the right to speak on behalf of her self and family is nothing more than the sounds of a mule. But one need only discover the incredible and long history of black women’s speeches and writings which have remained unread and unknown to even avowed feminists to understand that the impact of black women’s speech is reduced to background noise for white feminists. Used and confined in terms of strengthening of white feminism’s understanding of the intersections of race, class, and gender, and male race theorists comprehension of gender, the subtleties and insights of black women’s critical speech have remained the talking back that falls silent. Indeed the contradiction of black women’s speech is that it is perceived as loud, angry, and unreasonably demanding and quite simply a torrent of noise with untenable content.

hooks explains that despite never being taught absolute silence, she was nonetheless taught that “it was important to speak but to talk a talk that was itself a silence.”¹⁶ She describes speech which is intended to leave the lips without critical force and without the audacity to speak its desires, pain, and confusion. Speech which questioned authority, brought issues of pain and vulnerability to the fore, which aimed to expose the contradictions of one’s reality was identified as “crazy” speech and just as importantly speech which betrayed the privacy and primacy of the home sphere. As hooks describes, her spirit needed to be broken and she paid for the right to defiant speech with the sacrifice of safety and sanity only to be hounded by deep-seated fears and anxieties.¹⁷ Again though hooks describes the suppression of speech which characterized her home life, she argues that we must understand acts of suppression of speech, the breakdown of spirit, and persecution as these occur in the public sphere as well, especially to those who are made or deemed voiceless by systems of oppression. Describing her experience after publishing *Ain’t I a Woman?* hooks explains the toll black women pay to speak and write:

While I had expected a climate of critical dialogue, I was not expecting a critical avalanche that had the power in its intensity to crush the spirit, to push one into silence. Since that time, I have heard stories about black women, about women of color, who write and publish having nervous breakdowns, being made mad because they cannot bear the harsh responses of family, friends, and unknown critics, or becoming silent, unproductive. Surely, the absence of a humane critical response has tremendous impact on the writer from any oppressed, colonized group who endeavors to speak. For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such it represents a threat.¹⁸

Within a more general context of discussing feminist consciousness, Bartky argues that feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization.¹⁹ It is a consciousness which apprehends itself as embedded in a system which aims to exploit

and oppress it. In other words, feminist consciousness now becomes aware of itself as a victim, the injured, the diminished.²⁰

To apprehend myself as victim in a sexist society is to know that there are few places where I can hide, that I can be attacked almost anywhere, at anytime, by virtually anyone. Innocent chatter, the currency of ordinary social life, or a compliment, well-intentioned advice of psychologists, the news item, the joke, the cosmetic advertisement—none of these is what it is or what it was. Each reveals itself, depending on the circumstances in which it appears, as a threat, an insult, an affront, as a reminder, however, subtle, that I belong to an inferior caste. In short, these are revealed as instruments of oppression or as articulations of a sexist institution.²¹

However, as both Bartky and hooks insist, the apprehension of one's victimization is also the apprehension of one's strength. At the time that one becomes aware of the contradictions in one's social reality, one also gains awareness of what that reality could be and should be. Indeed for Bartky, as much as feminist consciousness is afflicted with alienation, ethical ambiguity, category confusion, it is also a consciousness of resistance, personal growth, and insights into possibilities for liberatory collective action.²²

What bell hooks brings to a discussion of feminist consciousness is the particular alienation, paranoia, anxiety, struggle, resistance, and strength of a black woman feminist consciousness which must come to voice in a landscape in which intersecting matrices of domination offer black women little or no privilege to speak meaningful knowledge about our existence(s) and the ways in which the struggles, questions, and conflicts, failures and progress of black women's lives as we negotiate the larger social sphere, reflect and disclose the pernicious racism, sexism, and classism in our society. Often characterized as angry, difficult, limited in their knowledge, black women, and especially black women intellectuals, face a tremendous battle to speak and to write in the hopes of being heard and in the hopes of speaking to their black and white sisters *precisely* as black women concerned with the experiences and knowledge of black women.

In the tradition of so many black women throughout the American landscape, hooks moves the experiences and knowledge of black women to the center of knowledge systems which continue to make reductive black women's speech and thus our resistance and struggle, when not completely neglectful of their presence and voice. I, myself, for the first time reading and teaching Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*, could not believe the courage and boldness that the diverse speakers and writers claimed as they forged a way to make black women's existence an existence of value, agency, and a corporeal symbol marked by and telling of the domination of American racism, sexism, and classism. Completely absent from all of my years of education and hindered by my own internal racism and ignorance, I could not have ever imagined prior to reading this text as well as texts by hooks that black women had over close to 200 years of written work demanding that what they experienced, saw, and knew be heard. In the midst of being incredulous at their brilliance and passion and at how their words spoke to my experience, I was

jarred by the consistent discomfort of some of my students. The very act of placing black women's writing in the center of a philosophy class all semester long resulting in any affirmation of black women speaking to black women in safe spaces was seen as separatist and exclusionary. White students familiar with women studies and philosophy courses insisted on the critique of identity as black women's compliance and complicity with the social structure merely because the writers spoke of having a particular view of domination from where they stood. Indeed, when their very privilege of being knowledgeable and objective interlocutors of all texts seemed threatened, they resorted to complaining about whether the classroom adhered to supposedly lofty standards of college philosophy classes. Black students, on the other hand, seemed to be confused at the presence of these voices critical of white supremacy, racism, and class domination now being thrust into the center of a classroom of mixed company. They unwittingly allowed the white students to control the classroom discussion. Uncertain of their capacity and ability to speak in the classroom setting at all, I had to explicitly tell them that this class was for them. Consciously or unconsciously, the black students did not appear to want to make any direct comments about white people in general. A few white students, however, complained of their discomfort at any hint that their white privilege could be a barrier to their connection to the experiences of black women.

After *Ain't I a Woman?* was published, hooks states that white women often told her they didn't feel that her book spoke to them.²³ What they could not know was that hooks's struggle to write a book on black women and feminism involved the very difficult task of confronting an audience:

When I began writing my first book, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*, the initial competed manuscript was excessively long and very repetitious. Reading it critically, I saw that I was trying not only to address each different potential audience—black men, white women, white men, etc.,—but that my words were written to explain, to placate, to appease. They contained the fear of speaking that often characterizes the way those in a lower position within a hierarchy address those in a higher position of authority.... When I thought about audience—the way in which the language we choose to use declares who it is we place at the center of our discourse—I confronted my fear of placing myself and other black women at the speaking center. Writing this book was for me a radical gesture.²⁴

hooks recognized that when she thought of her audience as black women, her voice became her own. She wrote with a frankness that many white women interpreted as hostile and exclusionary:

White women readers would often say to me, "I don't feel this book is really talking to me." Often these readers would interpret the direct, blunt speech as signifying anger and I would have to speak against this interpretation.... At a discussion once where a question about audience was raised, I responded by saying that while I would like readers to be diverse, the audience I most wanted to address was black, that I wanted to place us at the center. I was asked by a white woman, "How can you do that in a cultural context where black women

are not primary book buyers and white women are the principle buyers of feminist book?"... It had never occurred to me that white women would not buy a book if they did not see themselves at the center.... My placement of black women at the center was not an action to exclude others but rather an invitation, a challenge to those who would hear us speak, to shift paradigms rather than appropriate, to have all readers listen to the voice of a black woman speaking as a subject and not as underprivileged other.... I wrote...not to inform white women about black women but rather as an expression of my longing to know more and think deeply about our experiences.²⁵

These types of "anecdotes" are often the foundations for black women's writing and coming to consciousness and voice around their absence from knowledge systems and the validation of those systems.

I have often said that it was in the philosophical classroom that I found my voice. However, the space of philosophy can offer a deceptive illusion of freedom. One finds that one's very presence as a black woman philosopher disturbs, that one's voice and demeanor (in my case, working class and punctuated with a hint of mid-Atlantic black speak) in dialogue with texts appears to taint the purity of philosophy. If the speaking and writing of white feminist philosophers creates the space for self-transformation and the transformation of philosophy and has yet to fully invade the purity of philosophy, black feminist consciousness disturbs and challenges that purity even more. And yet, the act of speaking and writing from this consciousness remains the risk of liberating the (my) voice and resisting domination of the philosophical oracle voice spoken in the tenor of upper class white men. Fraught with the difficulties of fear, anxiety, and self-doubt over being heard when one puts oneself as a black woman into the center, black feminist consciousness attempts to recover and transform a self within the context of conditions which alienate, isolate, and are cause for despair. Black feminist consciousness must not only name its pain, a radical gesture in and of itself, but it must uncover the strategies for resistance and liberation with little or no protection or armor to aid in its longing for transformation.

hooks's description of talking back and coming to voice offers a phenomenology of black women's feminist consciousness which allows us to understand the risk of punishment many black women face. This consciousness traverses the structures of transcendence and facticity and challenges the philosopher's stance of unthreatened transcendence and objectivity in depicting the relationship between self and the world and the questions and concerns are derived therefrom. As Carla Peterson argues, in her attempt to understand the literary production of black women writers of the North, in order to enter the arena of public civic debate, nineteenth century black women had to achieve an "additional oppression by consciously adopting a self-marginalization that became superimposed upon the already ascribed oppressions of race and that paradoxically allowed empowerment."²⁶ In negotiating and traversing the limits of the public and private spheres in which black women's bodies and voices threatened homogeneity of the discourses of racial uplift as well as women's rights, nineteenth century black women "entered a state of liminality... in which an individual, separated from society comes to be 'betwixt and between

the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.”²⁷ Peterson shows that these women who entered the liminal space did so at great risk even as these spaces provided possibilities for self-expression and *communitas*. Traveling amidst the marginalized realms of religious evangelical activities or female antislavery societies, these women often entered the *communitas* of liminal spaces alone and could remain isolated at a time in which the black women’s bodies were conceptualized as both oversexualized and masculine. Unprotected by common conceptions of femininity afforded white women and made vulnerable by speaking in the public realm afforded only to men, these women left home, employment, and communities to hold an ambiguous insider/outsider status in relation to the very communities they hoped to benefit.

What we find by looking at the writings of these black women, according to Peterson, are writings which may suggest racial insecurity but are more frequently pervaded by portraits of a sick and debilitated body:

Indeed, almost all these women were plagued throughout their lives by illnesses that often remained undiagnosed but whose symptoms were headaches, fevers, coughs, chills, cramps, or simply extreme fatigue. In such instances illness may quite possibly have occurred as a consequence of the bodily degradation to which these women were subjected or as a psychosomatic strategy for negotiating such degradation. In either case the black female body might well have functioned as what Elaine Scarry has called the body in pain, whereby the powerless become bodies subject to pain and dominated by the bodiless voices of those in power.²⁸

Black women negotiated the public gaze of the liminal space as both a body empowered and a body made vulnerable and disordered. Peterson argues that this negotiation of the public gaze and the interpretations of black women’s bodies and voices by diverse audiences meant that “from their dislocated and liminal positions these black women ultimately turned to the *literary representation* of self-marginalization—to the writing of self, spirituality, and travel, the reprinting of public lectures, and the creation of fictional worlds—in an attempt to veil the body while continuing racial uplift activities in the public sphere.”²⁹ Writing and speaking, then for these women are examples of “talking back” as they reacted to their exclusion from organized institutions designed for racial uplift or women’s empowerment. Indeed, as Peterson points out, nineteenth century black women utilized a diversity of modes of literary representation in order to address an epistemological issue: how to represent the relationship of the self to the self and the other.³⁰

As black women continue to recover past voices as well as write themselves anew amidst the public gaze; as we continue to place black women’s voices at the center, we continue to reveal and locate the coming to power, coming to voice, and liberatory transformation of consciousness painfully won historically by black women. More importantly, we can come to comprehend the risks taken by black women to speak and be heard. By doing so, we may increase the possibilities and spaces for further phenomenological analyses of the oppressed, hidden, neglected experiences attempting to transform the society and world around black women.

Notes

1. For this most important gift, I would like to thank Jeffrey Reiman, American University. Though he could never have known the depth of my need for the singular, courageous voice of bell hooks (as I did not as well), he understood something about what it might mean for me to have the model of a black woman's voice which could enable my own courageous acts of speaking and writing.
2. hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 1.
3. Ibid., 2.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge 1990), ix.
6. hooks, *Talking Back*, 12.
7. See George Yancy, "Introduction: No Philosophical Oracle Voices," in *Philosophy in Multiple Voices* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
8. Ibid., 7–8.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. hooks, *Talking Back*, 5.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 6.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12.
16. hooks, *Talking Back*, 7.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 8.
19. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 15.
20. Ibid., 16.
21. Ibid., 17.
22. Ibid., 21.
23. hooks, *Talking Back*, 15.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 16.
26. Carla L. Peterson, *"Doers of the Word": African-American Speakers and Writers of the North (1830–1880)*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 17.
27. Peterson, *"Doers of the Word"*, 17.
28. Ibid., 21.
29. Ibid., 22.
30. Ibid., 23.

8

bell hooks and the Move from Marginalized Other to Radical Black Subject

MARIA DEL GUADALUPE DAVIDSON

The election of 1948 was telling. Strom Thurmond, States' Rights Democratic Party presidential candidate, echoed his party's slogan of "Segregation Forever" for the entire country to hear. Thurmond carried four Southern states (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina), and received over one million votes and thirty-nine electoral votes from those in favor of continuing racial apartheid. In addition to his segregationist activities, Strom Thurmond also filibustered the Civil Rights Act of 1957 (he spoke for a still unbroken Senate record of 24 hours and 18 minutes), he voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and he voted against confirming Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. It wasn't until after Thurmond's death in 2003 that his estate publicly acknowledged the existence of his biracial daughter, Essie May Washington-Williams, whom he fathered with sixteen-year-old Carrie Butler (a servant in his family's home) when he was twenty-two. Thurmond met his daughter when she was a teen, and though he did not publicly acknowledge Mrs. Washington-Williams during his lifetime, he did provide for her education and regularly communicated with her in private.¹ Thurmond's commitment to his daughter's well-being begs the question: how could a man like Strom Thurmond, so full of public disdain for black people, a man who built a political career out of denying the equal rights of black people, care for the black body of his daughter Essie May Washington-Williams? This question becomes more relevant in light of the Thurmond family's response to Ms. Washington-Williams's press conference in which she revealed perhaps the worst kept secret in South Carolina political history. While most of us would wonder why she remained silent for so long, it is worth noting that some members of Strom Thurmond's family carried on as if Mrs. Washington-Williams had done something wrong in breaking her near sixty-year silence. Jeffrey Gettleman, in his article "Thurmond Family Struggles with a Difficult Truth," cites several members of the Thurmond family as fighting to come to terms with the revelation of Thurmond's interracial intimacy. One family member, Ms. Mary T. Thompkins Freeman, who is Thurmond's niece, went so far as to say that this (read: black illegitimate daughter) was a "blight on the family."²

It is this paradox of hatred and desire that lies at the heart of understanding bell hooks's notion of the *commodification of otherness*. On the one hand, Thurmond's actions mirror the way that the black female body was sexually exploited during slavery, and his white niece's "blame the victim" (ignorant) response is similar to that of ante-bellum white women who blamed enslaved black women for the abuse they received from white men. In both cases, it is as if the wrong were for her (the black female) to speak and not for what he (the white male) had done. On the other hand, Thurmond, and his relatives by extension, desired and benefited from this exploitation of the black female body: politically, financially, and socially. Through her notion of the *commodification of otherness*, hooks examines how white supremacist, patriarchal society has both denigrated and desired the black female body. The black female body is the paradox of a body that is desired while at the same time she is abhorred; she is both useful and expendable, she is sacred and she is taboo.

It is my contention that we can gain insight into hooks's understanding of radical black subjectivity through her notion of the *commodification of otherness*. This is especially important for the feminist movement inasmuch as it can advance the discussion of the black female body from the issue of objectification to subjectivity and agency. hooks reminds us of the importance of this shift, when she observes that, "As long as white Americans are more willing to extend concern and care to black folks who have a 'victim-focused black identity,' a shift in paradigms will not take place."³ To develop this paradigm shift in hooks's work, my chapter explores the following questions: First, how does bell hooks understand the *commodification of otherness*? Second, how might this notion elucidate the imperiling paradox of a black body that is at the same time a subordinated other and a coveted commodity? Finally, how might this account of the commodification of the black female body provide resources for the development of radical black subjectivity? Whereas the commodification of otherness complicates one's ability to self-identify and works to nullify one's being, I will show that hooks's notion of *radical black subjectivity* seeks to create spaces where multiple, affirming black subjectivities may occur by giving voice and power to black women with the intention of encouraging them to speak their own sacred names in a way that bears witness to the importance of race, class, and gender and their impact on the lives of black women.

Much of the work currently done by black feminist scholars, in one way or another, attempts to decipher black women's status as commodified other. For example, Ann duCille in "The Occult of True Black Womanhood" asks:

Why are black women always already Other? I wonder. To myself, of course, I am not Other; to me it is the white women and men so intent on theorizing my difference who are the Other. Why are they so interested in me and people who look like me (metaphorically speaking)? Why have we—black women—become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation?⁴

For duCille, to be a commodified other means that you, your body, is reduced to an object which can be, and for many women often is, brutalized by the forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Yet, the problem is how to make this exploitation visible beyond visceral feelings and unarticulated fears of disenfranchisement. In her

canonical text *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that “Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justification for their existence.”⁵ hooks, like duCille and Collins, seeks to make visible the “ideological justifications” that exclude and at the same time commodify black women.

Because she is most interested in opening up a space for self-definition for women of color, hooks points out the limitation of mainstream gender critiques from the likes of Betty Friedan whose analysis she argues was limited to a “select group of college-educated, middle-and upper-class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products who wanted more out of life.”⁶ hooks seeks to expand the feminist movement by way of rendering visible *other* women—those commodified others “who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually—women who are powerless to change their condition in life.” “They are” she continues “a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage.”⁷

The silence of these women, women like Ms. Washington-Williams, is indicative of their historical commodification and silence. According to Trudier Harris, black women commodified as other are:

Called Matriarch, Emasculator, and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient, and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself.⁸

It is a silence of near resignation to their status as commodity that began with enslavement and still continues today for many black women. Since for hooks the lives of these women matter, hooks’s analysis of the commodification of otherness seeks to describe the multiple ways in which blackness is exploited by the insatiability of the white appetite. In so doing, hooks highlights the point that “cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten.”⁹ In order to give voice to the lives of black women, then, we must challenge the white cannibalism through which the commodification of otherness occurs. We can do this first by making the white consumption of the black female body visible.

Commodified Otherness: What’s Marginalization Got To Do With It?

In this section I will explicate the foundational principle of commodified otherness in hooks’s thought. I begin with commodified otherness because I believe that hooks uses it as a point of contrast against her radical black subject.

In her well-known essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers, like Trudier Harris above, speaks of the black female image in the white imagination, and in doing so, makes visible the implications of commodified otherness. Spillers observes:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.¹⁰

Here we see that black female existence "describe(s) a locus of confounded identities" in the white imagination—the black female body is both invisible and hypervisible. Many of these negative identities have been exploited by white society for its own economic, political, emotional, and sexual gain. Spillers goes on to express that the "markers" mentioned above "...demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean." Like Spillers, hooks encourages us to question these markers which are "so loaded with mythical prepossession."

For hooks, the notion of the commodification of otherness refers to a system whereby the subject status of black people is denied, and black people are exploited for the gain of white supremacist patriarchal society. For hooks, the bodies of black people become a site of pleasure, and a place where whites encounter difference in the conspicuous act of consumption. Turning to the media to provide proof for her claim, hooks writes that "within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference" and she goes on to say that "the commodification of otherness has been so successful because it is offered as new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling."¹¹ Since white culture suffers from boredom, other races and ethnicities provide "spice" to what is normally a bland, white existence. Turning to Michel Foucault, hooks goes on to add that:

Though speaking from the standpoint of his individual experience, Foucault voices a dilemma felt by many in the west. It is precisely that longing for the pleasure that has lead the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the "primitive" and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or a dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility.¹²

As a result of whiteness' longing for a primitive and dark continent—an unknown—white supremacist patriarchal society eroticizes the black body. This is historical, and the bodies of Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, or the young Carrie Butler, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, all bear witness to the eroticization and commodification of the black female body. So, for example, joined to the commodification of the young body of Harriet Jacobs, in terms of the amount of work that "it" could provide the Flints and the amount of money "it" could be sold for, is her sexual availability. Sojourner Truth's body was commodified in the same way, and we can read her evocative speech "Ain't I a Woman?" as a challenge vis-à-vis her status both as commodity and as other. Finally, young Carrie Butler's position followed the same pattern as those of Jacobs and Truth. Her commodifica-

tion as a worker for the Thurmond family is tied to her sexual availability for Strom Thurmond. This linkage between the commodification and sexual availability of black and other nonwhite women continues today, as evidenced by hooks's own description of an encounter with a group of Ivy League white boys while she walked through downtown New Haven.¹³

Ignoring her older, black female body, she overhears them talking about which nonwhite girls they planned on trying to "fuck."¹⁴ hooks shows how those white boys methodically "ran it down. Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into one category) deemed easier to entice, were considered 'prime targets.'"¹⁵ "To these young males," she concludes, "and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other.... Getting a bit of the Other, in this case engaging in sexual encounters with non-white females, was considered a ritual of transcendence, a movement out into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage."¹⁶ In this instance (and countless others), hooks argues that the inferiority of blackness and the female body is tied to the eroticization of the black female body. Although whiteness might regard its sexual contact with black bodies as a show of revolutionary liberation and as an acceptance of multiculturalism, in fact what is actually taking place is the recurrence of the traditional understanding of black bodies as commodities available for white consumption. "From the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," hooks observes, "the hope is that desire for the 'primitive' or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*."¹⁷ The commodification of otherness reveals what hooks calls an "imperialistic nostalgia."¹⁸ Even though whites regard the physical contact with black bodies to be nonviolent, nonracialized, and nonracist, hooks regards this as an act of bad faith which only perpetuates the *status quo*.¹⁹ It is important to note that hooks detects this as bad faith on the side of blacks as well. Just as the eroticization of the black female body may be falsely interpreted as an act of tolerance, it can also be falsely interpreted by black females as an act of acceptance. This theoretical move is important since marginalizing attention from white society can be misconstrued as "...marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation."²⁰ What this means is that marginalized groups may be seduced into believing that the attention given to them by white patriarchal society is an affirmation of their subjectivity. However, hooks is clear that this attention does nothing more than reify the black body as a commodity and a marginalized other. If the above analysis is correct, then the central question concerns whether blacks have any power to resist white commodification. How, in other words, does hooks empower the marginalized other to resist whiteness and to emerge as a radical black subject?

In response to this question, hooks cautions us against several temptations in thinking about the status of black women. One temptation would be to embrace the claim, while false and deeply problematic that since white supremacist patriarchal society desires the bodies of black women, black women would thereby gain an acceptable subjectivity. To understand black women solely as objects of desire, hooks

reminds us, only further entrenches their marginal status. Another temptation would be to promote the status of black women through a separation from white, patriarchal society. Against this temptation, hooks cautions that separatist calls to break from white supremacist patriarchal society are misguided at best, and at worst, a denial of the history and real experiences of black people.²¹ With respect to the realization of black nationalism, hooks registers a good deal of skepticism as she writes that the “Resurgence of black nationalism as an expression of black people’s desire to guard against white cultural appropriation indicates the extent to which the commodification of blackness...has been reinscribed and marketed.... Given this cultural context, black nationalism is more a gesture of powerlessness than a sign of critical resistance.”²² Instead of either simply acquiescing to a marginalized status or turning away from white society and history altogether, hooks emphasizes the key role of discourse in transforming black subjectivity.

Although she does not state it expressly, hooks’s work is implicitly aligned with discourse analysis,²³ construed broadly. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke famously states that “Man is a symbol-using animal,”²⁴ and according to Burke, we use symbols to nonverbally communicate meaning.²⁵ Burke importantly calls our attention to the potentiality of language and symbols to name, define, and destroy the object of verbal and nonverbal speech. Similarly, throughout her work, hooks argues that the superiority of whiteness is inscribed through verbal and nonverbal discourse such that, “If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation.”²⁶ The role of discourse analysis here is to deconstruct misconceptions of blackness and the relegation of black people to the status of the marginalized other. Discourse analysis asks that we see those “...institutional conditions and power-structures that serve to make given statements accepted as authoritative or true...”²⁷ Hooks’s analysis of the media images of black women in particular challenges us to confront the images that reinforce the nonbeing of black women as “true.” For example, she uses the obsession with black women’s butts²⁸ (think Josephine Baker), the wildness of Tina Turner,²⁹ the exotic images of Iman and Naomi Campbell³⁰ as tropes used to communicate (verbally and nonverbally) the availability of black women as objects of sex and sexual desire. Additionally, discourse analysis asks that we “...understand the function of a particular discourse, the way they position their subjects in relations to contempt and respect, of domination and subordination or of opposition and resistance, we pass quickly and ineluctably from conceptual critique to social critique.”³¹ White supremacist patriarchal society establishes a false dichotomy that positions whites as subjects and black people in general and black women in particular as subordinated and marginalized others. While hooks provides an intellectual critique of such oppressive discourses, this critique alone is not enough. She asks that we move beyond the critique of power, domination, and subjugation to a praxis of liberation which challenges the status quo. One such challenge comes in the form of her *radical black subjectivity* which, like discourse analysis, “...is not only a reflexive process; it is also a productive process or a process that brings change.”³²

It is obvious from our discussion that hooks rejects all forms of commodified otherness. In doing so, hooks creates a space whereby she can begin to examine a meaningful and positive black identity; both of which she posits in her radical black subject.

Radical Black Subjectivity

While hooks's overall corpus is for the most part strikingly clear, her conception of radical black subjectivity remains elusive. Like a painting which evokes but does not give its meaning, hooks's use of this concept fascinates but evades the reader. hooks is clearest about what it is not. Radical black subjectivity is not an offshoot of shared victimization, nor is it merely about rejecting external constitution in favor of a self-inflicted negative constitution much like what occurred during the black power movement. Readers of hooks's work are familiar with her criticism of the black power movement, especially her critique of its insistence on obtaining the rights *to* and the privilege *of* patriarchy.³³ hooks is equally critical of black national struggles to receive societal benefits on a par with white society. hooks asserts that:

Retrospective examination of black liberation struggle in the United States indicates the extent to which ideas about "freedom" were informed by efforts to imitate the behavior, lifestyles, and most importantly the values and consciousness of white colonizers. Much civil rights reform reinforced the idea that black liberation should be defined by the degree to which black people gained equal access to the material opportunities and privileges available to whites.³⁴

As shown by hooks, movements like the Black Nationalist Revolt are more reactionary than revolutionary; they are more about black men getting a "piece of the proverbial pie" than about true equality built on a positive and revolutionary subjectivity. So, while clearly telling the reader what radical black subjectivity is not, hooks asks the reader to imagine what radical black subjectivity might be through the anecdotes that she shares.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks relates an instance where she and other black women were planning a conference on black feminism. During the planning process, the women revealed stories about growing up in segregated black communities and the pain that they endured at the hands of the community.³⁵ Speaking against what she saw as a monolithic rendering of black female being and experience, hooks tells a glorious story of being loved, cherished, and strengthened in her all black community explaining that, "It gave me the grounding in a positive experience of 'blackness' that sustained me when I left that community to enter racially integrated settings, where racism informed most social interactions."³⁶ To her surprise, hooks was castigated for "erasing" the experiences of other women, while her own story "was reduced to a competing narrative, one that was seen as trying to divert attention from the 'true' telling of black female experience."³⁷ Where, she wonders, was the "narrative of resistance"³⁸ to be found in all this "shared pain and victimization?"³⁹

From this negative encounter with people who look like her and who supposedly share the same goals, it is no small wonder that hooks's radical black subject specifically seeks to address Paulo Freire's edict that, "We cannot enter the debate as objects only to become subjects."⁴⁰ By struggling with this edict, hooks's notion of subjectivity is neither predicated on the rhetoric of victimization nor is it a bestowal of subjectivity onto blacks by white society. By pointing out the dilemmas of associating one's self with the problematic position of being an "object" and then struggling to become a "subject," hooks, I believe, shows us that if language is a power grab, then it is best from the beginning to be on the side of the positively empowered. This is especially true since blacks have never willingly given up their subject status nor their place in the sun. hooks certainly acknowledges that enslavement, false media portrayals, and whiteness have complicated black subjectivity, but these negative encounters are not the basis of her notion of subjectivity. She focuses rather on the fact that such negative depictions and encounters have never successfully erased black subjectivity. The difference between black subjectivity and *radical* black subjectivity is that the former is a binary concept, established through its opposition to whiteness. Radical black subjectivity is not limited to a binary relation, whereas black subjectivity sees its mission solely in terms of rejecting the external constitution and "dehumanization"⁴¹ imposed by whiteness. In developing a radical black subjectivity, hooks asks that we look beyond the negative and externally imposed multiplicity of the commodified other.

One way in which we look beyond the multiple negative meanings embedded in the marginalized other is to see marginalized otherness as a site of resistance against commodification. In her article "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," hooks turns marginalization on its head by looking to the margins as a site of resistance. "Perhaps the most fascinating constructions of black subjectivity and critical thinking about the same," she writes, "emerge from writers, cultural critics, and artists who are poised on the margins of various endeavors."⁴² For hooks, being a "marginalized other" (if one is empowered), means being able to speak and act freely. It also means being able to theorize the potentiality of radical struggles. Since those on the margins who are empowered tend to:

...share a commitment to left politics...recognize the primacy of identity politics as an important stage in [the] liberation process. We quote Audre Lorde, who said "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" to claim the ground on which we are constructing "homeplace" (and we are not talking about ghettos or shantytowns).⁴³

hooks outlines some of the characteristics of those "writers, cultural critics, and artists who are poised on the margins of various endeavors" and who, for hooks, exhibit the consciousness and fluidity that marks her radical black subject. Of this "avant-garde" group of people she writes that they "...eschew essentialist notions of identity, and fashion selves that emerge from the meeting of diverse epistemologies, habits of being, concrete class locations, and radical political commitment." Subsequently, her radical black subjectivity is defined by an "oppositional worldview, a consciousness, and identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle

which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization.”⁴⁴ She goes on to add that: “Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become—to make oneself anew.”⁴⁵ Radical black subjectivity thereby disrupts the commodification of the black female body. Instead of occupying the position of an object, the black female body becomes a source of transformative action. hooks writes that, “Even the most subjected person has moments of rage and resentment so intense that they respond, they act against.”⁴⁶ These moments of rage, if coupled with an understanding of the “space within oneself where resistance remains” and eventually develops into “critical thinking and critical consciousness,” empower one to access the creative sources by which one can self-define.

It is in moving away from the static black subject who, hooks argues, marked progress by the “degree to which black people gained equal access to material opportunity and privileges available to whites” or alternately marked progress by the degree to which black males gained access to power, authority, and patriarchy; that radical subjectivity emerges to counter the work of commodification.⁴⁷ It is, according to hooks, the responsibility of thinkers to supply alternate ways of *being-black-in-the-world* that do not reinscribe the negative understanding of blackness or look to “that Other for recognition.”⁴⁸ These thinkers are not afraid, because their desires are not market driven but driven by liberatory discourse to posit various positive understandings of blackness that transcend commodification by embracing otherness as a position of power. In naming otherness or marginality as she calls it as a “site of transformation”⁴⁹ hooks creates a space “where liberatory black subjectivity can fully emerge, emphasizing that is a definite distinction between marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility.”⁵⁰

Notes

1. Essie-Mae Washington, interview by Dan Rather, “Strom’s Daughter: A Burden Lifted,” *60 Minutes*, December 16, 2003, <http://www.CBS News.com> (accessed October 16, 2008).
2. Jeffrey Gettleman, “Thurmond Family Struggles with Difficult Truth,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com>
3. hooks, *Killing Rage, Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 58.
4. Ann duCille, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies,” in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 21–56.
5. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).
6. hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1982).
9. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 39.
10. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 57–87.
11. hooks, *Black Looks*, 21.
12. Ibid., 27.

13. In her discussion hooks points out that downtown New Haven was seen as a battleground, of sorts, "where racist domination of blacks by whites was contested on the sidewalks, as white people, usually male, often jocks, used their bodies to force black people off the sidewalk, to push our bodies aside, without ever looking at us or acknowledging our presence." *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press), 23.
14. hooks, *Black Looks*, 23.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 23–24.
17. Ibid., 22.
18. Ibid., 25.
19. Lewis Gordon and Robert Birt have both argued that whiteness is an act of bad faith. In his essay, "The Bad Faith of Whiteness," Robert E. Birt provides a compelling argument for construing whiteness as bad faith when he writes that "Whiteness is the bad faith identity of the racially dominant. The bad faith of whiteness is the self-deception of the privileged, the inauthenticity of dominant people within a racialized social hierarchy." Robert E. Birt, "The Bad Faith of Whiteness" in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58.
20. hooks, *Black Looks*, 26.
21. Ibid., 32.
22. Ibid., 33.
23. For a thorough discussion of discourse analysis see Laetitia Zeeman, Marie Poggenpoel, C. P. H. Myburgh, and N. Van Der Linde, "An Introduction to a Post Modern Approach to Educational Research: Discourse Analysis," *Education* 123 (2002): 96–102.
24. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 3.
25. Burke goes on to say that: "Language referring to the realm of the nonverbal is necessarily talk about things in terms of what they are not—and in this sense we start out beset with a paradox. Such language is but a set of labels, signs for helping us find our way about. Indeed they can even be so useful that they help us to invent ingenious ways of threatening to destroy ourselves. But even accuracy of this powerful sort does not get around the fact that such terms are sheer emptiness, as compared with the substance of the things they name." *Language as Symbolic Action*, 6.
26. hooks, *Black Looks*, 1.
27. M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 66.
28. hooks, *Black Looks*, 63.
29. Ibid., 66–69.
30. Ibid., 72–73.
31. Ian Parker. *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 37.
32. Zeeman et al., "An Introduction to a Postmodern Approach to Educational Research," 96–102.
33. Responding to Kathleen Cleaver's statement that "She was destroyed by the movement," hooks writes that "Insistence on patriarchal values, on equating black liberation with black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over black women, was one of the most significant forces undermining radical struggle." See hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press), 16.
34. hooks, *Yearning*, 15.
35. hooks, *Black Looks*, 44.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 45.
40. hooks, *Yearning*, 15.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 19.
43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 15.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 15.
47. Commodification of blackness as other refers to the limiting of blackness to something that can be sold to white society, regardless of whether it is produced by blacks. To illustrate this, she uses Spike Lee's *She Gotta Have It* and *School Daze* and August Wilson's *Fences* as examples; see hooks, *Yearnings*, 18.
48. hooks, *Yearning*, 22.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid..

9

The Ethics of Blackness

bell hooks's Postmodern Blackness and the Imperative of Liberation

CLEVIS HEADLEY

Recently, there has been an apocalyptic turn with regard to race: enthusiastic calls for the end of blackness.¹ bell hooks, however, is more nuanced in her position and does not think the end of blackness is needed. What is needed is to forsake a certain style of thinking about blackness. Hence, hooks's tone and mood are both less apocalyptic precisely because she uses a language that enables her to rethink blackness beyond the restrictive structures of an either/or logic. While avoiding the extremes of acting out or harboring denial in response to blackness, hooks decides to work through blackness. She writes:

Recent critical reflection on static notions of black identity urge transformation of our sense of who we can be and still be black. Assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic other are not the only available options and never have been. This is why it is crucial to radically revive 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.²

The goal of this chapter is to present a detailed discussion of hooks's retheorizing of blackness from within the context of postmodernist theory. The significance of hooks's position emerges from the fact that her main objective is not simply to offer a dismantling or deconstruction and disposal of blackness, but rather, to relocate blackness within a theoretical and analytical context far removed from the hegemonic and totalizing violence of essentialism. Clearly, then, the goal is not to prolong or to defend any kind of metaphysical blackness, that is, treating blackness as a transcendental category or a transcendental signified that grounds the possibility of the intelligibility of thinking and talking about blackness. To this end, as mentioned earlier, hooks delinks blackness from theoretical and analytical styles of thinking that reify blackness and place it outside the context of everyday existence. She denounces strategies to make blackness a unitary subject and, instead, advocates a pluralistic conception of blackness, a move that makes it possible to describe blackness in the vocabulary of heteronomy and multiplicity.

It should be noted that hooks's postmodernist approach to blackness is situated

within the context of the ethics of deconstruction. This conception of postmodernism, which allies itself with development in poststructuralist thought, should be carefully distinguished from the version of postmodernism articulated by thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. These thinkers theorize postmodernism as designating the end of history, meaning that they reject the idea of history as progress, historical teleology, and the linearity of history.

Even Lyotard defines the postmodern as, among other things, the rejection of metanarratives.³ His position is that there is no self-justifying discourse; there are no foundational principles outside discourse that serve as the legitimating ground for discourse. Indeed, he declares a war on totality. This declaration of war against totality can be differently framed as the idea that, “The essence of postmodernism is precisely that we should avoid pointing out essentialist patterns in the past.”⁴ But, although Lyotard shares much with the likes of Jameson and Baudrillard, his position is complicated by his advocacy for plurality and by the fact that his notion of the *different* resonates with the ethics of deconstruction.

The conception of the postmodernism as a revolt against metanarratives is not alien to hooks, for she castigates constructions of blackness premised on grand narratives; that is, grand narratives positing essences beyond the context of the various discourses of everyday existence. However, I think that a great advance could be made if we were to place hooks’s work within the context of a postmodernism informed by the ethics of deconstruction or a postmodernism construed as deconstruction. Again, hooks’s transgressive act of integrating blackness and postmodernism facilitates a move away from conceiving blackness as permanent or as a real presence. Instead, hooks’s theoretical transgressivity, her theoretical border crossing, sets in motion the possibility of a hybrid blackness structured within the cognitive space of spectrality and plasticity. Here, by spectrality I am referring to the fact that blackness is not a material essence—nothing substantial—but, rather, is opaque and immaterial in the sense of always being fleeting and not contained in any definitive conceptualization.

Obviously, then, the postmodernism of Lyotard and others is going to be blended with another postmodernism. By postmodernism, then, we should understand philosophical thinking associated with the likes of Levinas and Derrida. This specific conception of the postmodern entails an involvement with the idea of ethics as responsibility for the other.

hooks also offers at least some evidence of her involvement with the idea of ethics as responsibility for the other. She declares:

[U]nderstanding comes through our capacity to empty out the self and identifying with that person whom we normally make the Other. In other words, the moment we are willing to give up on our ego and draw in the being and presence of someone else, we’re no longer “Othering-ing” them, because we are saying there’s no space they inhabit that cannot be a space we can connect with.⁵

The general structure of this chapter is as follows: Section one involves a general discussion of the incommensurability between postmodernism and blackness. This

section also includes a technical discussion of the connection between deconstruction and ethics. Section two covers hooks' defense of the relevance of postmodernism to blackness. It also includes a discussion of her ethical conception of postmodern blackness. Section three discusses issues relating to the ethical implications of postmodern blackness. Section three also includes the conclusion of the chapter where I briefly consider a critical response to hooks' position.

Incommensurability of Postmodernism and Blackness

Certain black thinkers deny the relevance of postmodernism for black identity. Not only do they view postmodernism as a threat to black identity, they fear that it can also lend comfort to neoconservative ideologies that resurrect reactionary appeals to individual responsibility as a way of deflecting racial critiques of the status quo. The idea is that the "celebration of agency among the oppressed has served as an entry way to postmodern analysis, which in turn has proven to be the back door to reemphasizing individual responsibility."⁶ Let us examine the claims of at least one of these thinkers.

Joyce A. Joyce, in a popular essay in *New Literary History*, scolds black thinkers who mischievously involve themselves with poststructuralism. Joyce expresses strong disapproval of what she calls "the poststructuralist sensibility," which "does not adequately apply to Black American literary works."⁷ Irritated and baffled, Joyce does not understand the motivations of those black thinkers who flirt with postmodernist ideas. Unnerved and exasperated, she confesses, "I do not understand how a Black critic aware of the implantations of racist structures in the consciousness of Blacks and whites could accept poststructuralist ideas and practices."⁸ She holds that black thinkers who engage in strategies to deconstruct "race," including "the subject," as core conceptual categories, are not only dismantling their very own literary traditions but, even more regrettably, their own identity as blacks. Again, she sternly insists that, "It is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or...negates his blackness."⁹ The message is clear: Deconstructing race and the subject are destructive acts that entail the demise of black identity.

In order to adequately judge the relevance of postmodernism in the context of blackness, we need to get a clearer understanding of postmodernism, especially through the lens of the ethics of deconstruction.

The Origins of Deconstruction as Ethics

Deconstruction is a philosophy of the other, an ethics that emerges from Levinas's attack against totalizing philosophies that exclude the other in the name of some present sameness. Simon Critchley insightfully captures the theoretical thrust of Levinas's novel conception of ethics. Critchley writes that, "[E]thics is first and foremost a respect for the concrete particularity of the other person in his or her singularity.... Ethics begins as a relation with a singular, other person who calls me into question and then and only then calls me to the universal discourse of reason and justice. Politics begins with ethics."¹⁰ Indeed, Derrida maintains that "[t]

he Levinas who most interested me at the outset was the philosopher working in phenomenology and posing the question of the 'other' to phenomenology."¹¹

Levinas reads the history of Western philosophy as an extended ontology, a project of comprehending the being of what is or "beings." Ultimately, this project of enclosing things within a dominant conceptual net assumed the task of translating the other to the same, devouring the other, liquidating the other, transcribing all cases of otherness into sameness. He accuses Western philosophy of being complicit in promoting an imperialism of the same with the tragic result that Western philosophy "has been struck with a horror of the Other that remains Other—with an insurmountable allergy."¹² Rodolphe Gasché offers a crisp description of this phenomenon: "Western philosophy is in essence the attempt to domesticate Otherness, since what we understand by thought is nothing but such a project. . . ."¹³ The project in question is the reduction of plurality to unity, the reduction of alterity to sameness, and the mastery of the other. While denouncing the imperialist ontological tendencies of traditional philosophy, Levinas declares that "ethics is first philosophy." In announcing ethics as first philosophy, rather than ontology, Levinas intends to situate ethics as a radical questioning of the priority of the ego, of the knowing subject, and of self-consciousness. Levinas alternatively calls these things the "same." And he defines the "same" in the following way:

We call it "the same" because in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I. To remain the same is to represent to oneself.¹⁴

Ontological pursuits foster the recoiling of the self into the self while at the same time they facilitate a forgetting, even a suppression of the other. Levinas, however, directly connects ethics to the other. He defines ethics as follows: "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics."¹⁵ In another context, Levinas states "For me, the term ethics always signifies the fact of the encounter, of the relation of myself with the Other. . . ."¹⁶ We should immediately note that neither Levinas nor Derrida is constructing a normative theory of ethics, namely, the normative theory of right and wrong as was traditionally identified as the task of ethical philosophy. Rather, Levinas is pursuing a phenomenology of ethical experience. The possibility of ethics, for Levinas, is not dependent upon establishing absolute principles. Rather, ethics is the phenomenon of an individual being called into question in the presence of the face of the other. Ethics, according to Levinas, is grounded in "the ethical recognition of the infinity of the Other that transcends and resists all categorical mediation. . . ."¹⁷ To be more specific, the infinity and the transcendence of the Other are the main concerns of ethics. The transcendence of the Other is emergent from the disclosure "that the face of another person expresses an otherness beyond all comprehension. . . ."¹⁸ And the infinity of the other becomes manifested as the realization that, "Face of the other awakens me to a responsibility that is unlimited, unqualified, or simply infinite."¹⁹ Ethics names a nontotalizable relation with the other such that the singularity of the other places in question the ego or consciousness. Indeed, for Levinas, ethics is not an expression of the ego;

rather it is by recognizing ethics as responsibility for the other that an individual “I” emerges. Levinas directly states that “it is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the Other that makes me an individual ‘I.’ I become a responsible or ethical ‘I’ only to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable Other.”²⁰

In addition to framing ethics as a putting into question of the ego, we can also describe ethics as a critique. Simon Critchley states that “Ethics, for Levinas, is also critique; it is critical...of liberty, spontaneity, and the cognitive empire of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. The ethical is therefore the location of a point of alterity, or what Levinas also calls ‘exteriority’, that cannot be reduced to the Same.”²¹ The defining insight of ethics for Levinas is the relation with the other, but a relation not premised upon the colonization of the other by the same. Levinas tells us that ethics is a “preconceptual experience of a provocation by the other.”²² He alternatively recites his conception of ethics as a relation to the other in the language of the face. Ethics is a matter of relating to the face of the other. “In the language of transcendental philosophy,” according to Critchley, “the face is the condition of the possibility for ethics.”²³

It is hoped that the preceding discussion of deconstruction as ethics has revealed some of the core claims of deconstruction and its relation to ethics. At this juncture, an investigation of hooks’s take on the relevance of postmodernism to blackness is in order.

hooks On Why Postmodernism Is Relevant to Blackness

That bell hooks’s work can be easily connected with the ethical thrust of deconstruction is obvious in light of her declared reasons for theorizing blackness. “Theorizing black experience,” hooks writes, “we seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys, are possible.”²⁴ hooks also situates her analysis and interrogation of blackness within a context that does not sustain any metaphysical or essentialist treatment of blackness. Indeed, she declares in her introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, “In *Black Looks*, I critically interrogate old narratives, suggesting alternative ways to look at blackness [and] black subjectivity...”²⁵ In order to execute this heterogeneity of blackness, she acknowledges that blackness is entangled within a tristructural system of domination: white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It is obvious that, for hooks, the triad of race, class, and gender represents three points of view from which to obtain an understanding of the complexities of blackness. Indeed, as some writers have boldly proclaimed, hooks’s work is informed by “the wicked triangle of race, class and gender.”²⁶ But hooks’s critical engagement with race, class, and gender is decidedly normative, for she seeks to unsettle the structural logic of domination that analogically informs the various regimes of subordination. She admonishes us to: “[pay] attention to the either/or ways of thinking that are the philosophical underpinning of systems of domination. Progressive folks must then insist, wherever we engage in discussions of...issues of race and gender, on the complexity of our experience in a racist sexist society.”²⁷

In her struggle against notions of blackness that are ethically disabling, hooks announces that she is against “prefabricated notions of black identity...”²⁸ Prefabricated notions of blackness erase the dense existential context of the existence of black people and treat blacks as objects by assuming that, like objects, blacks claim an essence that precedes their existence. She similarly rejects “any monolithic construction of black people...”²⁹ In another context, she writes: “The contemporary crisis of identity is best resolved by our collective willingness as African Americans to acknowledge that there is no monolithic black community, no normative black identity.”³⁰

In battling against the objectification of blackness, hooks’s ethical project is infused with notions of otherness and difference. Indeed, the trope of transgressing also conveys her determination to violate the various barriers of oppression that block subject-to-subject relationships.

Perhaps it would be helpful to review, though briefly, hooks’s own characterization of her work to better acknowledge and appreciate the commensurability existing between her thinking and postmodernist discourse. As we shall see, hooks’s project is committed to a radical ethics of otherness. She writes that she locates her work “in the realm of oppositional political struggle,”³¹ and that her work is also motivated by a “radical perspective shaped and informed by marginality.”³² hooks both writes from a perspective of otherness and difference, as well as seeking to promote a progressive agenda dedicated to otherness and difference. She does not treat marginality in a hegemonic manner; she adopts a critical stance with regard to marginality, distinguishing between an unethically oppressive marginality and a more ethically informed marginality. According to her: “I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility.”³³

hooks also adopts a style of writing that is consistent with her desire to escape monolithic ways of thinking about self and identity. She emphasizes the importance of positionality and how positionality undermines existential and cognitive stasis regarding our concrete existence. She writes:

[W]e have to consider “positionality” that are shaking up the idea that any of us are inherently anything—that we become who we are. So a lot of my work views the confessional moment as a transformative moment—a moment of performance where you might step out of the fixed identity in which you were seen, and reveal other aspects of the self...as part of an overall project of more fully becoming who you are.³⁴

We should note that hooks’s mentioning of positionality, a notion grounded in the idea of standpoint epistemology, is not meant to mark an abstract or objective perspective. Rather, hooks indicates that her taking positionality seriously entails certain existential and concrete consequences. She writes, “The passion in my voice emerges from the playful tension between the multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory locations I inhabit.”³⁵

In another context, she further elaborates on her work describing her style as

performative. It would seem that her choice to use the language of performativity is to underscore her enactment of the existential density of an ethics of otherness. Here we are referring to the lived categories of gender, race, and class, etc. As she writes: "I think a lot of what's going on in my work is a kind of theorizing through autobiography or through storytelling. My work is almost a psychoanalytical project that also takes place in the realm of what one might call "performance"—a lot of my life has been performance, in a way."³⁶

Regarding her own life experience as a black woman, she also employs an anti-essentialist framework to describe the black community where she grew up. In describing this community, hooks makes it clear that invoking blackness need not entail embracing essentialism. She writes: "[w]e don't want to get stuck in false essentialism.... I don't want to suggest that something magical took place there because everyone was black—it took place because of what we did together as black people."³⁷

hooks is clear that she is also concerned with promoting the idea of identity as something that is fluid, multiple, and open. Indeed, she warns that one of her main concerns is to promote a radical notion of subjectivity that is emergent from the infinite possibilities of modes of being. There is a clear ethical echo in her words:

Turned off by culture vultures who want me to talk "race only," "gender only," who want to confine and limit the scope of my voice, I am turned on by subjectivity that is formed in the embrace of all the quirky conflicting dimensions of our reality. I am turned on by identity that resists repression and closure. This interview is a site where I could transgress boundaries with no fear of policing—a space of radical openness on the margins, where identity that is fluid, multiple, always in process could speak and be heard.³⁸

Although our concern in this chapter is hooks's ethical working through of the notion of blackness, we should note that to the extent that her thinking is informed by a radical ethics, she focuses this ethical vision on all forms of subordination that frustrate ethical encounters with those variously designated as the other. Again, she describes her work in the following manner. She writes:

Part of what I try to express in my work is that racism, sexism, homophobia, and all these things really wound us in a profound way. Practically everybody acknowledges that incest is wounding to the victim, but people don't want to acknowledge that racism and sexism are wounding in ways that make it equally hard to function as a self in everyday life. And...something like having a person reach out to you with warmth can just be healing....³⁹

Earlier it was mentioned that hooks seeks critical involvement with blackness without embracing any metaphysical or essentialist conception of blackness; her goal is to promote an ethically infused notion of blackness, a conception responsive to otherness and difference. At the same time, she acknowledges the sensitivity of this enterprise. hooks describes this aspect of her work in the following manner:

I concentrate on the ways critiques of essentialism have usefully deconstructed the idea of a monolithic homogenous black identity and experience. I also

discuss the way a totalizing critique of “subjectivity, essence, identity” can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been a active gesture of political resistance to name one’s identity as part of a struggle to challenge domination.⁴⁰

Let us now examine in greater detail hooks’s critique of essentialism from the perspective of her critical encounters with blackness.

hooks on Essentialism

hooks’s ethical involvement with blackness warrants a brief discussion of her take on essentialism. We recall that essentialism is ethically suspect, at least from the perspective of the ethics of deconstruction, precisely because essentialism sustains practices of inclusion and exclusion based on totalizing and hegemonic notions of sameness and identity. In the tradition of the metaphysical, a thing is what it is by virtue of possessing certain necessary attributes. Things are hierarchically arranged in terms of essences and then axiologically categorized as either good or bad. Things classified as good are judged more valuable than those things classified as bad. Things judged bad are considered to be lacking some necessary essence and, hence, believed to be less valuable than the other class of things. The ethics of deconstruction, instead of privileging sameness and identity, emphasizes difference and otherness, the idea being that ethics is a matter of respecting the singularity of the other.

hooks’s rejection of essentialism is obviously connected to her ethical critique of blackness, particularly blackness framed in terms of a racial essence. When blackness is thought of as an essence, we are presented with notions of a monolithic black identity. And both essentialism and notions of a monolithic black identity threaten to erase the diversity of lived experience of blacks. She states:

Contemporary critiques of essentialism (the assumption that there is a black essence shaping all African-American experience, expressed traditionally by the concept of “soul”) challenge the idea that there is only “one” legitimate black experience. Facing the reality of multiple black experiences enables us to develop diverse agendas for unification, taking into account the specificity and diversity of who we are.⁴¹

Essentialism is also highly problematic precisely because it encourages the denial and suppression of difference. The deployment of essentialism for the purpose of suppressing difference is ethically corrosive because the singularity of the other is erased and the infinity of the other is also blended with a bland homogeneity of sameness. Protesting the blunting of difference, hooks writes that: “[I] find myself constantly at odds with workers for freedom who invest in the notion of a unitary self—a fixed identity. I continually resist surrendering complexity to be accepted in groups where subjectivity is flattened out in the interest of harmony or a unitary political vision.”⁴²

Just as essentialism weakens difference and the singularity of the other, it also threatens subjectivity. Being a subject, among other things, is a matter of exercising creative human agency. Furthermore, acting as a subject requires participation in

sociocultural forms of life such that one can pursue conceptions of the good life. Additionally, subjectivity requires the expression of autonomy so that one does not speak in an alien voice but, rather, is able to speak with one's voice. hooks offers the following take on the subject/object distinction: "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject."⁴³

Essentialism is a problem because it encourages the false notion that subjectivity is something that is given and not earned. Subjectivity becomes a substance instead of correctly being seen as an achievement, as the product of a process of intervening in the world. According to hooks: "Breaking with essentialist thinking that insists all black folks inherently realize that we have something positive to gain by resisting white supremacy allows us to collectively acknowledge that radical politicization is a process—that revolutionary black thinkers and activists are made, not born."⁴⁴

Essentialism, instead of embracing and acknowledging that categorization is always an incomplete and noncomprehensive process, sustains thinking that is reactionary. So, instead of extending the range of thought by employing new concepts, essentialist thinking sanctions thinking within already established concepts. For example, hooks criticizes the black aesthetic movement because it was guilty of essentialist thinking; it complacently promoted conceptual inversion in the guise of being politically progressive. But, to the extent that the black aesthetic movement simply inverted dominant concepts, it remained trapped in a vicious binary thinking. "The black aesthetic movement," hooks states, "was fundamentally essentialist. Characterized by an inversion of the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy, it inverted conventional ways of thinking about otherness in ways that suggested that everything black was good and everything white bad."⁴⁵ She also adds that the conceptual limitations of the black aesthetic movement restricted its ability to offer a comprehensive and sustainable conception of black subjectivity. According to hooks, "identity...is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic other. Instead identity is evoked as a stage in a process wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity."⁴⁶

hooks's persistent critique of essentialism includes a focus on the fact that essentialism is inconsistent with the pluralism and the heterogeneity of thinking and being. If knowledge is narrowly construed as the grasping of essences, then ways of knowing that are grounded in achieving instrumental goals or developing various cognitive strategies that enable human beings to cope with the unruly challenges of their physical environment will be denigrated. Furthermore, ways of knowing that are grounded in the body as a medium of knowing and not rationalistic assumptions will be similarly denigrated. hooks, however, urges openness and hospitality to diverse ways of knowing and being, hence, she renounces essentialism. Indeed, for hooks, the nonessentialist multiplicity of the self emerges vis-à-vis a multiplicity of sites and other heterogeneous elements. For example, she tells us that: "We are avant-garde only to the extent that we eschew essentialist notions of identity, and fashion selves that emerge from the meeting of the diverse epistemologies, habits of being, concrete class locations, and radical political commitments."⁴⁷

Once again, hooks's critique of essentialism, however, is not ideologically driven such that she can only advance a simplistic denunciation of essentialism. She complicates her attack on essentialism by making a few adjustments. First, hooks warns that we should not naively assume that only marginalized groups uncritically dispatch essentialism for less than progressive purposes. hooks writes: "[W]hile I... critique the use of essentialism and identity politics as a strategy for exclusion or domination, I am suspicious when theorists call this practice harmful as a way of suggesting that it is a strategy only marginalized groups employ."⁴⁸

Second, although hooks opposes vulgar essentialism, she believes that a critique of essentialism does not translate into a radical denial of the authority of experience. So, although an essentialist notion of blackness is problematic, it does not follow that blacks are unable to utilize the experience emergent from a shared history of oppression, and, alternatively, the shared history of resistance to oppression. Hence, hooks concludes, "Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory."⁴⁹

Finally, hooks does not intend for her critique of essentialism to serve any reactionary political purpose. Although she appreciates formal theoretical critiques of essentialism, she thinks that the material reality of power, especially for marginalized groups, can override abstract analysis. So, even if essentialism is primarily theoretical, it may nevertheless serve specific political purposes. According to hooks:

I was thinking concretely about public policy, though. This is to me one of the clashes between the kind of theory that is being made in academia and the reality shaping public policy. When people come to public policy, in fact people do deal with these notions of collective identities, so it is very difficult when we say: let's critique these identities politics. When you come to the level of public policy how do you deal then with locations of specific groups? This is why I tried to think about Gayatri Spivak's... attempt to talk about strategic essentialism—because there are things that are specific to what it is to be black and female in the USA. How do you deal within a larger understanding of progressive politics, of gender and ethnicity and class, when there are in fact specific things that affect black females that affect no other group in the same way? How do you talk about that in a way that does not reaffirm flat notions of identity politics? It seems to me that that is the challenge we face.⁵⁰

Since hooks has rejected essentialism, it becomes important to investigate in greater detail her ethical construction of blackness.

hooks's Ethical Construction of Blackness

At this juncture, a more direct examination of hooks's ethical understanding of blackness is in order. This discussion will take two forms: first we shall examine hooks's ethical approach to blackness, which will involve thinking blackness outside the context of essentialism. This task involves thinking blackness beyond the oppositional negation of whiteness. The second approach will focus on hooks's ethical

critique of blackness as constructed and understood by blacks. Here, hooks's main concern is to get "black people...to talk to each other across our difference."⁵¹

hooks points out that there is a tradition of thinking about blackness in the dominant culture where blackness functions as a sign of difference. However, this notion of blackness as a sign of difference projects negative valuation on blacks such that blackness is the opposite of a good and innocent whiteness. According to hooks, "Most folks in [American] society do not want to openly admit that 'blackness' as sign primarily evokes in the public imagination of whites...hatred and fear."⁵² To the extent that whites interpret blackness as a sign of hatred and fear, the possibility of subject-to-subject relations between blacks and whites is impossible; indeed, the possibility of a mutually self-flourishing ethical relationship is not possible.

From an alternative perspective, blackness for blacks conjured diverse conceptions. Roughly speaking, about three paradigms of blackness have survived among blacks in recent time. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to identify these paradigms as participating in black modernism. These various paradigms exploited the notion of a unitary black community and black identity. hooks offers the following insights:

During the sixties, [the] black power movement was influenced by perspectives that could easily be labeled modernist. Certainly many of the ways black folk addressed issues of identity conformed to a modernist universalizing agenda. There was little critique of patriarchy as a master narrative among black militants. Despite the fact that black power ideology reflected a modernist sensibility, these elements were soon rendered irrelevant as militant protest was stifled by a powerful, repressive...state.⁵³

The separatist paradigm presented a conception of blackness as both the ontological, as well as the axiological, opposite of whiteness. In a classic binary structure, the separatist paradigm constructed blackness as incommensurably different from whiteness. "Separatist black folks," according to hooks, "evoked an identity politics based on the assumption that ethically and morally whites and blacks were different, had no common experience, and did not share the same political agenda."⁵⁴

hooks identifies a second paradigm of blackness: cultural blackness. In this context, blackness is articulated in specifically cultural terms. Blackness entails the expression of unique cultural characteristics. hooks notes, however, that this form of blackness emerged in part as a reaction to whiteness. According to her:

For some folks the reclamation of [black] identity entailed asserting a fierce blackness that involved cultivating a specific way of speaking, dressing, and interacting. Gone was the notion that bonding with blackness was a survival strategy rooted in the experience of shared suffering and in its place was the idea that one "proved" black identity by the manner in which one responded to whiteness.⁵⁵

The third paradigm of blackness did not invest in the attempt to articulate blackness as being distinct from whiteness nor blackness as a cultural response to whiteness. Rather, the third paradigm of blackness invested in the promise of an

integrated society where racial difference played no decisive role in determining the fate of an individual. Assimilation became the goal of this third paradigm. hooks offers the following description of this third paradigm of blackness: "Assimilated black folks evoke an identity politics rooted in the privileging of a model of integration, wherein allegiance to blackness was abdicated in the interest of erasing race and promoting an ethos of humanism that would emphasize commonalities between whites and blacks."⁵⁶

The second step in presenting hooks's ethical construction of blackness involves briefly discussing the relation between postmodernism and blackness, which it should be noted is not the same as postmodern blackness.

Postmodernism and Blackness

Since we have already explored the general relevance of postmodernism for blackness, it is appropriate to discuss some of the specific relations between characteristics of postmodernism and blackness. Obviously, if dominant notions of blackness were constructed within the conceptual scheme of modernism, these notions of blackness are modeled on essentialist notions of the self-present self. A blackness informed by the postmodernist critique of essentialism will be a postmodern blackness that eschews the idea of a black essence or a unitary, static black identity.

The relevance of postmodernism to black existence is not always immediately appreciated or acknowledged. This tendency of not immediately recognizing any obvious relation between postmodernism and black existence emerges from the perception that postmodernist discourse is too esoteric and detached from the everyday world of black existence. Hence, talk about difference is often met with skepticism precisely because talk about difference appears to be the latest fad domesticated by the status quo and rendered politically impotent. In light of the alleged political impotence of postmodernist discourse, many blacks, according to hooks, are not too enthusiastic about critiquing essentialism. According to her: "The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience."⁵⁷

In another context, hooks writes: "Considering that it is as subject one comes to voice, then the postmodernist focus on the critique of identity appears at first glance to threaten and close down the possibility that this discourse and practice will allow those who have suffered the crippling effects of colonialization and domination to gain and regain a hearing."⁵⁸

hooks herself laments the absence of a significant body of work dealing with black culture that is informed by postmodernist concepts and categories. She claims that cultural criticism informed by postmodernist insights is needed to "enrich our understanding of social formation of black identity [and] the commodification of 'blackness'..."⁵⁹ She is confident about the relevance of postmodernism to understanding blackness, and she specifically identifies this relevance on the postmodernist emphasis on difference. As pointed out earlier, this emphasis on difference takes

the form of a concern with ethics, and a concern with ethics requires a focus on responsibility for the other. In this context, blackness, as the other of whiteness or, rather, the regime of sameness, is the other for whom ethical responsibility should be assumed. hooks writes: "Radical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a "politics of difference," should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people."⁶⁰

hooks is also confident about the importance of postmodernism speaking with a black voice. She maintains that postmodernism can liberate blacks from the oppression of narrow notions of blackness that trade in confining beliefs about identity. Indeed, she directly states that, "The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity."⁶¹ So, on her view, postmodernism, as an ethical critique of essentialism, is ripe with emancipatory possibilities for blacks. She alleges that:

[Blacks] have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constraining notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.⁶²

Far from being politically impotent, in the context of black existence, hooks claims that postmodernism militates against the notion of a self-present, fully contained subject that can offer blacks the opportunity to create oppositional practices grounded in the uncertainty of everyday existence. hooks locates the fear of some black thinkers regarding the postmodernist critique of subjectivity in the belief that it will undermine the political projects of the oppressed. She does not share this belief. So, accordingly, she believes that the postmodernist critique of modern subjectivity is relevant to an ethical rethinking of blackness. She writes:

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday.⁶³

Finally, hooks also calls attention to the defensive move made by blacks when they are confronted by the challenge to move beyond fixed notions of blackness and identity. She observes that some blacks might in reaction turn to black nationalism for comfort. She counsels against this desperate move to embrace nationalism, even if it is understandable. hooks writes:

Since black resistance struggle has traditionally relied on a unitary representation of blackness as a framework for identity politics, changes in black identity were and are viewed by many African Americans as deeply threatening. Rather than seeing the development of multiple black subjectivity as a positive intervention within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, many

black folks responded to the disruption of essentialist notions of blackness by attempting to reestablish identity politics via the call for black nationalism rooted in a vision of separatism.⁶⁴

We have reached the stage of our discussion where it is possible to initiate a discussion of some of the salient characteristics of postmodern blackness.

Postmodern Blackness

In critiquing essentialism, postmodernism provides a way of theorizing blackness as difference without constituting this difference as ontological in the sense of blackness claiming an unchanging metaphysical core. An ethically informed notion of difference situates difference within the context of one's responsibility to respect difference instead of viewing difference as something that should be domesticated and rendered palatable to the regime of sameness, or as something to be feared and ultimately eliminated. According to hooks:

One existing dimension to cultural studies is the critique of essentialist notions of difference. Yet this critique should not become a means to dismiss differences or an excuse for ignoring the authority of experience. It is often invoked in a manner which suggests that all the ways black people think of ourselves as "different" from whites are really essentialist, and therefore without concrete grounding. This way of thinking threatens the very foundations that make resistance to domination possible.⁶⁵

Ethically grounded notions of difference that acknowledge difference as emergent from modes of being in the world can accommodate the idea of blackness as difference and this can be accomplished without sanctioning crude and static conceptions of difference. Clearly, the challenge is to respect this difference.

Postmodernism also relates to interpretations of blackness within the black intellectual tradition. Here, instead of settling for what appears as exhaustive conceptions of blackness, postmodernism urges an openness to the possibilities of new interpretations of blackness, to the realization that blackness can always be redescribed and given alternative theoretical profiles. This radical openness to new interpretations of blackness need not be construed as efforts to undermine the political effectiveness of blackness. hooks comments on the effect of a postmodern critique of essentialism by blacks:

When black folks critique essentialism, we are empowered to recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible. When this diversity is ignored, it is easy to see black folks as falling into two categories; nationalist or assimilationist, black-identified or white-identified. Coming to terms with the impact of postmodernism for black experience, particularly as it changes our sense of identity, means that we must and can rearticulate the basis for collective bonding.⁶⁶

The history of black people is not jeopardized as a consequence of blacks pursuing

an ethical critique of essentialism. To the extent that black identity is grounded in history, an ethical critique of essentialism underscores the importance of attending to the ruptures and discontinuities of history without imposing on black history a meta-narrative informed by the imperative of fidelity to protecting the purity of experience. hooks tells us that, "There is a difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black 'essence' and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle."⁶⁷ Eclipsing outrageous claims that postmodernism offers comfort to a crippling nihilism, a nihilism incompatible with the struggles by oppressed groups for strategies of resistance, hooks extracts from postmodernism a source of inspiration. She coins the metaphor of "yearning" to describe the infinite longing for a voice of hope. As she writes: "Yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us.... Specifically, in relation to the post-modernist deconstruction of "master" narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced in the longing for critical voice."⁶⁸

hooks also expands upon the metaphor of "yearning," stating that it is a longing for the other, not desire in the material sense, but rather a welcoming of the other. "Yearning," according to hooks, "opens up the possibility of common ground where all...differences might meet and engage one another."⁶⁹

It seems as if the current account of hooks's encounter with postmodernism conflicts with common claims made about postmodernism. For example, there is the charge that postmodernism is against identity politics to the extent that identity politics mainly consists of battles regarding the fierce protection of oppressive notions of "authentic" identity. hooks directly confronts this claim by appropriately situating the controversy within a concrete context and refusing to pursue any deconstructuralized abstract analysis. She insists on the relevance of postmodernist thought for blacks but does not think that the postmodernist critique of "identity" entails an end to identity politics. Consistent with the idea of postmodernist critique as ethical, hooks acknowledges that the dominance of white supremacy justifies the continued importance of identity politics for blacks. The ethical challenge of the concrete other cannot be overridden by academic analysis that suspends the realities of power. hooks writes:

The postmodern critique of "identity," though relevant for a renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics. Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups.⁷⁰

It should not be a surprise that hooks considers postmodernism as an effective tool in combating racism. Since racism is, among other things, premised upon certain conceptions of blackness, eradicating racism entails interrogating oppressive notions of blackness. She identifies the tradition of white supremacy as complicit in creating and disseminating essentialist notions of blackness. White supremacy

sanctions notions such as the “primitive,” “authentic” experience, allegedly emergent from the naturalness of black existence. hooks maintains that “abandoning essentialist notions of [black identity fabricated by white supremacy] would be a serious challenge to racism.”⁷¹

Other factors propelling racism are: (1) the ideas that blackness is grounded in the immediacy of concrete experience and (2) that understanding blackness requires no involvement with theory. Hence, on this view, one might argue that even postmodernism should be avoided since its theoretical resources are of little value to a people whose concrete experience has no relation to theory. hooks claims that this attempt to segregate blackness from theory supports racism. However, a postmodernist ethical critique of essentialism can play a constructive role in combating racism. According to hooks: “[R]acism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived as either opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated.”⁷²

Another issue that must be investigated in connection with postmodern blackness is black subjectivity. We recall that essentialist notions of blackness pose a threat to black subjectivity. The task now is to examine the potential of postmodernism to unleash a radical black subjectivity that is intimately connected with postmodern blackness.

Black Subjectivity

When blackness is deliberately associated with the ethical critique of essentialism, it becomes important to rethink black subjectivity. However, rethinking black subjectivity is not to be taken lightly; it is demanding precisely because, as hooks claims, it must take place with the realization that “identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, [and] change.”⁷³ hooks is unapologetic in her ethical rethinking of black subjectivity within the theoretical framework of heterogeneity and difference. She warns that, “To embrace and accept fluid black subjectivities, African-Americans’ attachment to a notion of the unitary self must be broken. African Americans must embrace [a] progressive political understanding of diasporic black identity....”⁷⁴ hooks’s appropriation of the metaphor of “fluid” is not meant to connote a primary ontological point about the nature of subjectivity. She also intends to conjure up the ethical basis of black subjectivity in her decision to situate subjectivity within the discursive space of the metaphor of “fluidity.” According to her: “Fluidity means that our black identities are constantly changing as we respond to circumstances in our families and communities of origin, and as we interact with a larger world. Only by privileging the reality of that changing black identity will we be able to engage a prophetic discourse about subjectivity that will be liberatory and transformative.”⁷⁵

Subjectivity emerges as being inescapably important because of the significance of blacks intervening in the world as subjects, thus militating against their reduction to objects. To exist as objects precludes the possibility of engaging in subject-to-subject

relationships. However, to escape the limitations of essentialism and the racism complicit with essentialism, blacks must be capable of intervening in the world as subjects. hooks laments the phenomenon of neominstrel shows that entertain and titillate.⁷⁶ When blacks are seen through the lens of minstrel forms of being, they are treated as merely caricatures of subjects.

According to hooks, securing black subjectivity requires an indisputable rejection of white supremacy. Of course, the attempt to nurture black subjectivity is also an ethical project, for it should be grounded in a respect for the singularity of the other, in assuming responsibility for the other, ethical obligations that white supremacy renders illegitimate with regard to blacks. This is the case because, under white supremacy, blacks cannot be treated as legitimate ethical subjects. Indeed, blacks themselves are not qualified to recognize whites as subjects in the sense of making white subjectivity contingent on recognition from blacks. hooks insists that a robust black subjectivity requires opposition to white supremacy. She writes, "In theorizing black subjectivity we have to also revise our understanding of the conditions that are needed for black folks to join together in a politics of solidarity that can effectively oppose white supremacy."⁷⁷

The possibility of black subjectivity, to the extent that it is ethically inspired, is not contingent on blacks receiving recognition from whites. Indeed, to make black subjectivity dependent on recognition from whites involves blacks in a dialectics of recognition that is not ethically grounded. No ethically informed recognition can come from oppressors. hooks states: "Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy. We are not looking to that Other for recognition. We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner."⁷⁸

Black subjectivity takes on an urgency and ethical significance, according to hooks, precisely because of the counterproductive consequences of the coping mechanisms blacks have historically employed to survive the corrosive effects of white supremacy. Survival that is predicated on pacifying an oppressive other or on deception will ultimately render impossible the development of subjectivity that can encourage ethical relations based upon respect and responsibility. Again, mobilizing a postmodernist critique of essentialism creates conditions for blacks to escape the traditional practices that undermine black subjectivity. According to hooks:

[D]issimulation—the practice of taking on any appearance needed to manipulate a situation—is a form of masking that black folk have historically used to survive in white supremacist settings. As a social practice it promoted duplicity, the wearing of masks, hiding true feelings and intent. While this may have been useful in daily relations with all-powerful white exploiters and oppressors during a situation of extreme racial apartheid when our lives were constantly at risk, as a paradigm for social relations it has undermined bonds of love and intimacy by encouraging the overvaluation of duplicity, lying, masking, etc.⁷⁹

Theorizing black subjectivity, instead of being dependent on rigid and binary essentialist categories, will emerge from the creative imagination of blacks. This task of creating constructions of black subjectivity, according to hooks, will be embedded in narratives that are the products of the imagination of blacks. Here hooks connects black subjectivity with the powers of language, because it is through the capacity of language to accommodate difference that blacks will be able to fashion notions of selfhood outside the jurisdiction of white supremacy and essentialism. She is convinced that “the most fascinating constructions of black subjectivity... emerge from writers, cultural critics, and artists who are poised on the margins of various endeavors.”⁸⁰ She is so confident about the role of writers, critics, and artists in the production of constructions of black subjectivity, she maintains that failure to produce such constructions is a failure of critical imagination.⁸¹ Here, hooks is not supporting a playful textualism with regard to blackness and black subjectivity, viewing them as not materially connected to or grounded in everyday experience. Rather, at the risk of exaggeration, we can attribute to her the notion of a canonicity of blackness in the sense that there is an existing critical tradition of texts involved in an extended conversation about blackness. This tradition of writing does acknowledge certain texts as being structurally constitutive of a tradition of writing about blackness.

The notion of the textuality of blackness captures the fact that understandings and interpretations of blackness are relative to the flux and flow of historical consciousness. And this mentioning of historical consciousness suggests that we need to pay more attention to those immaterial features of human existence that are also spheres of subordination. Here I am thinking about the imagination and language as sites of subordination.

The Decolonization of the Mind

hooks connects her investigation of postmodern blackness to the importance of the decolonization of consciousness. A decolonization of blackness is needed precisely because blackness, in its modern variation, was constructed in a context where only whites were viewed as the appropriate individuals worthy of being considered subjects. The construction of modern white subjectivity was concurrent with the project of European colonization, which, among other things, involved not only the project of political control but also a control of thinking about the very meaning of existence. Colonization also included a control of thought and imagination. hooks believes that decolonization is needed in order to realize the potential of a postmodern blackness. According to hooks, “Whenever those of us who are members of exploited or oppressed groups dare to continually interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization.”⁸² Decolonization provides blacks with the opportunity to reject oppressive notions of identity and make it possible for them to consider alternative conceptions of self and agency that are not determined by colonizing categories of white supremacy and the essentialist categories it imposes on blackness. Decolonization is the path by which blacks secure subject-to-subject

interaction. hooks maintains that “The mutuality of a subject-to-subject encounter between those individuals who have decolonized their minds makes it possible for black rage to be heard, to be used constructively.”⁸³

Decolonization is also consistent with the ethical thrust of postmodernism precisely because it facilitates the coming into being of a new person to the extent that blacks liberate themselves from the damaging psychological effects of racism. We recall the role that essentialism plays in sustaining racism. To undermine essentialism is to rob racism of its theoretical support. And to defeat racism is to welcome new relationships premised on respect and responsibility for the other. hooks proclaims that decolonization means “that we could now militantly confront and change the devastating psychological consequences of internalized racism.”⁸⁴

Colonization is not only about the control of land; nor is it simply about political power; rather, it is also about the control of consciousness. The change in consciousness, resulting from a decolonization of the mind, transforms individuals, formerly content with their objectification, into subjects who are not at peace with the oppressive structures of the world. hooks writes: “I’ve written a lot about the necessity for black people to decolonize our minds. One of the things that happens when you decolonize your mind is that it becomes hard to function in the society, because you’re no longer behaving in ways people feel comfortable with.”⁸⁵

So far we have been discussing the relations between the postmodernist critique of essentialism and blackness. hooks argued that postmodernism is, indeed, relevant to blackness and she has articulated postmodern blackness. However, many thinkers would be sure to question the success of hooks’s project of postmodern blackness on the grounds that her support of postmodern blackness conflicts with the embrace, for example, of the slogan “black is beautiful.” According to the critical view, “black is beautiful” is a paradigmatic essentialist notion, for it naively exploits the binary opposition between blackness and whiteness. hooks supports the significance of the “black is beautiful” slogan, but she interprets it not as another masquerading essentialism, shamelessly exploiting the simplicity of binary thinking but, rather, as marking a radical political stance consistent with the ethical thrust of postmodern blackness. She regrets the tendency by some blacks to construct blackness as an inversion of whiteness. According to her: “Even though western metaphysical dualism as a paradigmatic philosophical approach provides the ‘logical’ framework for structures of domination in this society (race, gender, class exploitation), individuals from oppressed and exploited groups internalize this way of thinking, inverting it. For example: some black people may reject the assumptions of white supremacy and replace them with notions of black superiority.”⁸⁶

hooks’s claims that the slogan “black is beautiful,” when uttered, functions as a political gesture to deconstruct the horrible stereotypes that have harmed blacks. So, far from being a conservative exercise in the service of promoting a politically insignificant activity, the slogan is, instead, disruptive. hooks says: “The slogan ‘black is beautiful’ worked to intervene in and alter those racist stereotypes that always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable. One of the primary achievements of black power movement was the critique and in some instances dismantling of color-caste hierarchies.”⁸⁷

So great was the excitement generated by the slogan “black is beautiful,” so great was the popularity it enjoyed that it would seem that it was just another sociocultural fad short on political significance. Again, hooks contrarily considers the slogan as aligned with a political act, a radical intervention to exercise subjectivity and liberate blackness from the straitjacket imposed by white supremacy. Indeed, hooks tell us that, “In a white supremacy context ‘loving blackness’ is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life. When present it is deemed suspect, dangerous, and threatening.”⁸⁸

But even as hooks endorses the political thrust of “black is beautiful,” she is mindful that it is not a celebratory exercise but, rather, deals with the more serious issue of blacks extricating themselves from or protecting themselves from self-hatred. Self-hatred also is corrosive of black subjectivity, for it would seem that the individual who is burdened with self-hatred is incapable of entering subject-to-subject encounters with any degree of confidence. So, in resisting negative conceptions of blackness through the political act of loving blackness, hooks believes that blacks were actively rejecting “[s]ystems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism [that] actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, [forcing them] to be self-hating.”⁸⁹

The act of loving blackness, according to hooks, should not be taken lightly. True love of blackness is revolutionary precisely because it cuts against the grain of the hegemonic mainstream that neither recognizes nor respects the difference of blackness, its unique singularity. Hence, hooks warns that “[B]lack folks who ‘love blackness’—that is, who have decolonized our minds and broken with the kind of white supremacist thinking that suggests we are inferior, inadequate, marked by victimization, etc.—often find that we are punished by society for daring to break with the status quo.”⁹⁰

Ultimately, hooks considers loving blackness as both affirmative of life and love. It is not a project investing in hatred of whites or, for that matter, one seeking to promote the idea of hating whiteness. Of course, it is against white supremacy and must of necessity be oppositional to white supremacy to the extent that it resists domination. Indeed, loving blackness, announcing that “black is beautiful,” is a direct attempt to dethrone white supremacy and create a presence for blackness. hooks maintains that, “Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.”⁹¹ The context of white supremacy and the essentialist notion of blackness that it promoted led blacks to claim blackness through an act of deconstructing the blackness of white supremacy and then articulating a notion of blackness as beautiful in an act that made it possible to love blackness. hooks shares Howard Thurman’s take on the slogan “black is beautiful” from his text *The Search for a Common Ground*: “‘Black is beautiful’ became not merely a phrase—it was a stance, a total attitude.... In very positive and exciting terms it began undermining the idea that had developed over so many years into a central aspect of white mythology: that black is ugly, black is evil, black is demonic. In so doing it fundamentally attacked the front line of the defense of the myth of white supremacy and superiority.”⁹²

One possible criticism of hooks's notion of loving blackness and her positive take on the slogan "black is beautiful" is that she seems to suggest that only black people can love blackness. The question emerges: Is it possible for whites to love blackness? To the extent that hooks considers loving blackness as partly resistance to racism and white supremacy, she claims that whites can join in solidarity with blackness, so whites can also love blackness. hooks's answer to the question posed above is revealed in her comments on the theologian James Cone: "[H]e insisted that the politics of racial domination have necessarily created a black reality that is distinctly different from that of whites, and from that location has emerged a distinct black culture. His prophetic call was for whites to learn how to identify with that difference—to see it as a basis for solidarity."⁹³

The point is clear, embracing blackness need not entail a rejection of whites as an evil other, totally incapable of loving blackness. At this time, it is appropriate to conclude by critically considering a possible critical response to hooks's position.

Conclusion

hooks has certainly offered a radically new conception of blackness adequately informed with the ethical thrust of deconstruction. Her postmodern blackness is grounded in an ethical vision dedicated to preserving black identity and subjectivity freed from a politics of totality, a discourse of identity that regulates all the various aspects of the existence of blacks, ranging from culture and politics to religion and identity. Of course, it is not my contention that her position with regard to postmodern blackness is beyond reproach. For although it is true that blacks have endured the psychic violence of white supremacy, it would seem that hooks at times is too quick in her pronouncements about the damage suffered by blacks as a consequence of their internalizing both the negative images of blackness and the values of white supremacy. I would caution against the tendency to recruit the language of pathology to explain how blacks have dealt with the realities of racial subordination. Although one would not want to romanticize the tradition of black resistance to white supremacy, there should be critical awareness of the attempt by American social science to capture and contain blackness and black existence within its totalizing and hegemonic categories.⁹⁴ This tendency to deny that blackness can remain infinitely transcendent to the categories of the same often results in blackness being denigrated as pathology. So, even as hooks seeks to retheorize blackness, it would seem that greater critical awareness of the tradition of "pathologizing" blackness merits greater analytical scrutiny.

For example, I am calling for greater awareness of the "pejorative tradition" with regard to the study of blacks.⁹⁵ Here, various thinkers appropriated the language of pathology to situate black personality and culture. They claim that the personalities of blacks are damaged or that the culture of blacks is pathological due to the brutal experience of slavery and racial discrimination. Since racial discrimination either damaged blacks or else created the conditions that gave rise to a pathological culture, these thinkers argue that blacks can only claim a healthy and robust sense of self-respect by being liberated from racial oppression.

Nevertheless, despite whatever oversights haunt hooks's texts, she is to be commended for courageously transgressing the boundaries of essentialist and nationalist thinking about blackness and for establishing a friendship between blackness and postmodernism.

Notes

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2. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1990), 20.
3. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv.
4. F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 178.
5. hooks, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just For the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 258.
6. Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of Damaged Black Psyche, 1888–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 191.
7. Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (1987): 342.
8. Joyce A. Joyce, "Who the Cap Fit: Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Huston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (1987): 379.
9. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," 341.
10. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 48.
11. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," in Richard Kearney (ed), *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 108.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 346.
13. Rodolphe Gasché, *Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 101.
14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1994), 126.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Quoted in Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 5.
17. Anselm Kyongsuk Min, "Toward a Dialectic of Totality and Infinity: Reflections on Emmanuel Levinas," *The Journal of Religion*, 78, no. 4 (October, 1998): 571.
18. Jeffery Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 2.
19. *Ibid.*, 8.
20. Richard Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 27.
21. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 5.
22. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," 118.
23. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 5.
24. hooks, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Owl Books, 1995), 41.
25. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 5.
26. Marianner Grünell and Sawitri Saharso, "bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis on Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 6 (1999): 203.
27. hooks, "Race and Sex," in *Yearning*, 62.

28. hooks, "Liberation Scenes," in *Yearning*, 2.
29. hooks, "Censorship from Left and Right," in *Outlaw Culture*, 80.
30. hooks, "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," in *Killing Rage*, 247.
31. hooks, "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Yearning*, 145.
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33. Ibid., 153.
34. hooks, "Moving into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," 247.
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41. hooks, "The Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community," in *Yearning*, 37.
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46. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," in *Yearning*, 20.
47. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 19.
48. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 82.
49. Ibid., 90.
50. Quoted in Marianner Grünell and Sawitri Saharso, "bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis on Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender," 212.
51. hooks, "Ice Cube Culture: A Shared Passion for Speaking Truth, bell hooks and Ice Cube in Dialogue," in *Outlaw Culture*, 145.
52. hooks, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," in *Killing Rage*, 147.
53. hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning*, 25.
54. hooks, "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," 241.
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56. Ibid..
57. hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 29.
58. Ibid., 28.
59. hooks, "Liberation Scenes," 8.
60. hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 25.
61. Ibid., 28.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 31.
64. hooks, "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," 242–243.
65. hooks, "Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical Intervention," in *Yearning*, 130.
66. hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 29.
67. Ibid., 29.
68. Ibid., 27.
69. hooks, "Liberation Scenes," 13.
70. hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 26.
71. Ibid., 28.
72. Ibid., 23.
73. hooks, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just For the Joy of It," 247.
74. hooks, "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," 248–249.
75. Ibid., 250.

76. hooks, "Spike Lee Doing Malcolm X: Denying Black Pain," in *Outlaw Culture*, 191.
77. hooks, "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," 250.
78. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 22.
79. hooks, "Healing Our Wounds: Liberatory Mental Health Care," in *Killing Rage*, 143.
80. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 19.
81. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
82. hooks, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture*, 295.
83. hooks, "Killing Rage: Militant Resistance," in *Killing Rage*, 18.
84. hooks, "Back to Black: Ending Internalized Racism," in *Outlaw Culture*, 205.
85. hooks, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just For the Joy of it," 262.
86. hooks, "Liberation Scenes," 8.
87. hooks, "Black Beauty and Black Power," in *Killing Rage*, 120.
88. hooks, "Healing Our Wounds," 147–148.
89. hooks, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," 32.
90. hooks, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," 158.
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92. Quoted in hooks, *Killing Rage*, 189.
93. hooks, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," 151.
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95. See Charles Valentine, *The Culture of Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 20–21.

10

The Specter of Race

bell hooks, Deconstruction, and Revolutionary Blackness

ARNOLD FARR

The Problem of Race

Our age is a very deceptive one. It is an age that seems to champion equality, diversity, multiculturalism, and color-blindness while refusing to address real social inequalities and various forms of injustice, discrimination, dehumanization, and marginalization. In a period of liberalism where allegedly everyone believes in equality and color-blindness, the issue of race is made more complex and requires a more rigorous analysis. Further, it is an era that declares that race is not real: "We are all the same." It is true that the concept of race is a social construct used initially for the purposes of domination. However, we are reminded by Charles Mills that even social constructs are real, especially in terms of their real social, political, and existential consequences.¹

Race is like a specter. On the one hand it is not real, on the other hand it is very real in terms of its effects on racialized individuals and social groups. The reality of race lies in its power to organize groups in such a way that racial signifiers determine the availability of certain social and economic goods that are necessary for self-development and self-determination. Even while the biological status of race is questionable, it still haunts us, a specter without a material reality but that exists nonetheless as an attitude with problematic social consequences.

The work of bell hooks occurs at a difficult moment in the race debate. For decades the movement to overcome racism had as its motivating premise the notion of color-blindness. If we are all the same and see each other as such, then racism and its dehumanizing consequences would go away. At this point in our history this liberal conception of race is dangerous. The assertion that we are all the same, and the subsequent demand for color-blindness, is premised the social and historical relationships wherein our social, political, and existential identities were formed and then forgotten. It forgets the violence that shaped the long-term process of group identity formation and the future consequences of this violence. It forgets the way in which the past is carried into the present and future. Racial identities are real in terms of the social formation of racial groups and the benefits or lack of benefits that follow from these identities.

White liberals who urge us to believe that we are all the same perpetuate white

supremacy by ignoring their white privilege. That is, the history of racial discrimination in the United States has allowed many whites to accumulate the resources necessary for self-development and self-determination where blacks have suffered from a paucity of such resources.² Blacks tend to understand this privilege in ways that most whites don't and as a result they view whites through a critical lens and understand that sameness is a myth. hooks mentions that her white students are always surprised when they discover that they have been subjected to the black gaze. She writes:

Usually, white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where “whiteness” is the privileged signifier. Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical “ethnographic” gaze is itself an expression of racism. Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make race disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of “sameness,” even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think.³

Racism and its consequences are not overcome by pretending that race is not real. The issue here is what we do with our racial identities. This is where bell hooks makes one of her most important contributions to race theory.

In this chapter I will not enter the debate about the reality of race. I will, instead, examine the interesting, provocative, and prophetic way that bell hooks deals with the problem of racial identity. The debate about the reality of race falls short with respect to offering us a way to overcome the problem of racism and its long-term effects on people of African descent. bell hooks moves us beyond this debate into a discourse on what can be done with race to overcome racism. I see hooks as moving from the construction of race to the deconstruction of race to the revolutionary reconstruction of race (more specifically, revolutionary blackness). Before directly exploring hooks's contribution, however, more must be said about the problem of racial identity.

Essentialism and the Social Construction of Race

Race is a reality, but in what way? How does race function? How should race function? These are necessary questions when approaching the work of bell hooks. The difficulty before us is that of recognizing the reality of race while avoiding racial essentialism. Further, how do we recognize the reality of racial identity without perpetuating racial oppression and exclusionary practices? The problem is that of recognizing difference without making that difference essential and oppressive. I will set the stage for engaging hooks on these issues by citing an important distinction made by Iris Young between the essentialist meaning of difference and the egalitarian meaning of identity politics. Young writes: “Traditional politics that excludes or devalues some persons on account of their group attributes assumes an

essentialist meaning of difference; it defines groups as having different natures. An egalitarian politics of difference, on the other hand, defines difference more fluidly and relationally as the product of social processes.⁴

The institution of slavery in the United States was justified, in the minds of white racists, by the division of human beings along racial lines. Racial difference began with the mere difference in geography and phenotype and later the fabrication of moral difference. Recognition of physical differences between Africans and people of European descent was used to make unjustifiable claims about differences in morality, character, and human essence. Whites were taken to be fully human while those of African descent were taken to be subhuman. Blacks (people of African descent) were believed to be by nature less human than whites. This is a long story that we are all familiar with; I will not bore the reader with the continuation of this racist narrative. The point is that the concept of race was not merely based on recognition of physical difference. Rather, physical difference was used to make claims about the humanity and worth of people of African descent that cannot be derived from physical differences alone. It is important here to make a distinction between natural differences and the social production of differences.

It is undeniable that there are physical differences between Africans and Europeans. Natural differences such as skin color are not the issue. The problem is with the type of narratives such differences give birth to and how those narratives are used for the purposes of dehumanizing an entire group of people. In the case of Africans, their natural, accidental differences were used by Europeans for the construction of racial hierarchies wherein Europeans were viewed as fully human and Africans were viewed as less than human. This narrative was given philosophical and scientific justification.⁵ Sander Gilman writes: "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan."⁶

Gilman's entire essay examines medical literature which used the supposed difference in genitalia between white women and black women to make claims about the moral character of black women. It is from this sexual/racial narrative that we get the historical image of the black Jezebel. I cannot fully examine these issues given the scope of this chapter; I simply wanted to point out the role of essentialist racial narratives in the production of racial identity.

We know today that these racist narratives are false. The problem for us is the long-term consequences of such narratives and the role that they play in social identity formation. Essentialist racial narratives play a role in the construction not of essentialist identities but rather socially constructed identities which are nonetheless real and have real social consequences. The construction of race takes place in the context of Euro-American exploitation and dehumanization of African people. This construction of race is designed to use racial identity as a signifier of the human status of people of European descent and to signify the "subhuman" status of people of African descent. Blackness then becomes a marker, a signifier that carries with it many negative connotations. Blacks or people of African descent then become victims of this signifying practice.

The Deconstruction of Race and Postmodern Blackness

The social construction of essentialist racial identities is oppressive and dehumanizing for people of African descent. Unfortunately, not only is essentialist racial identity perpetuated by the system of white supremacy, it is also maintained and perpetuated by blacks who are the victims of racial essentialism. Racial essentialism is dangerous whether it be from whites or blacks.⁷ Therefore, racial identity must be deconstructed. hooks calls for a deconstruction of race and what she calls postmodern blackness as an emancipatory response to the system of white supremacy. It is here where I think some of her most important contributions are made.

Racial essentialism has its origin in the desire to establish a racial hierarchy wherein one race can justify the domination of another. It is claimed by the advocates of such a hierarchy that not only is racial difference established by nature, but that the position of races within the hierarchy is natural and cannot be changed. Blacks by nature are lower on the great chain of being than whites. The idea that race is a social construct shows that the racial hierarchy is human, all too human. Hence, racial identity in terms of a system of social valuation is not given but constructed. The essentialist construction of racial identity attempts to separate races from each other in terms of some racial essence. This leads to the belief that there is a white essence and a black essence. We might even say that white people have a white soul with certain necessary features (such as higher intelligence) while black people have black souls with certain necessary features (such as lower intelligence).

The deconstruction of race makes possible the development of a counterhegemonic discourse that challenges the hegemony of "white power." It discloses the fluid nature of racial identities as well as the contingent nature of racist narratives that are constructed for the purposes of racial domination. Deconstruction is not merely a method that is applied to *things*. The point of deconstruction is to show that things simply refuse to conform to our static definitions. John Caputo describes it as follows: "The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices⁸ of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more⁹ than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy."¹⁰

With respect to race, racial essentialism attempts to construct fixed, racialized identities that rob black persons of their agency. As we have seen, such essentialist identity formation requires the construction of a narrative which takes the form of a hegemonic discourse that is constructed and maintained by the "dominant" race. However, this attempt to enclose one's racial identity fails because the individuals encircled by certain racial signifiers are much more than the racial signifiers can contain.

With respect to the deconstruction of race, one of hooks's most philosophically provocative essays is "Postmodern Blackness." hooks calls for a postmodern blackness as a challenge to essentialist notions of racial identity. This essay is crucial for understanding the problem of black racial identity. It presents a problem that I think is central to hooks's contribution to race theory. That is, how is racial identity possible without some support of racial essentialism? Is racial identity necessary if

we are to overcome racism? While postmodernism has presented us with a solution to racial essentialism it has also created another problem that hooks grapples with in "Postmodern Blackness."

Postmodernism (deconstruction included) has presented an important challenge to essentialist notions of racial identity by challenging the very notion of identity itself. However, hooks reminds us:

The postmodern critique of "identity," though relevant for renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics. Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups.¹¹

Postmodernism falls short as a critique of race because its discourse is directed "to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge."¹² That is, postmodernism emerges as a white, male, academic discourse directed to white, male, academic discourse. As such, it does not adequately consider the position of the oppressed. Postmodernism attempts to rid us of subjectivity and identity before blacks have been recognized as subjects.

At one level this critique of identity and subjectivity is necessary. At another level it goes too far. hooks writes:

Considering that it is as subject one comes to voice, then the postmodernist focus on the critique of identity appears at first glance to threaten and close down the possibility that this discourse and practice will allow those who have suffered the crippling effects of colonization and domination to gain or regain a hearing. Even if this sense of threat and the fear it evokes are based on a misunderstanding of the postmodernist political project, they nevertheless shape responses. It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics by saying, "Yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one." Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the "subject" when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time. Though an apt and oftentimes appropriate comeback, it does not really intervene in the discourse in a way that alters and transforms.¹³

The point here is that the postmodern view that there is no subject is very problematic with regard to the critique of racism. In fact, racism denies black subjectivity. The postmodern rejection of the subject fails to take into consideration the situation of the oppressed who have fought to have their subjectivity recognized. Further, postmodernists fail to recognize that their rejection of the subject comes from a place of privilege where their own subjectivity has not been denied by a system which sought to dehumanize them altogether. However, although postmodernism fails in some respects, it is useful in others.

The postmodern critique is helpful in challenging essentialism. "Postmodern

critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.²¹⁴ The postmodern critique of identity does not necessarily require the abandonment of subjectivity and identity, but rather, a freeing up of identity. That is, identity is no longer viewed as something static, fixed, and universal. There is no fixed, universal black or white identity. Identity, rather, hovers before us as a possibility. However, this possibility is not random. The horizon of possibility is still contextual. Therefore, it is still possible to speak of black identity without recourse to essentialism.

Simply put, black identity, although not universal or fixed, is shaped by its social/historical context. To be black in America situates one within a social/historical narrative that includes the slave trade, slavery, and Jim Crow segregation. What binds together blacks in America is not some black essence that is imparted to us by nature, but rather, a history, a history that included the attempt by white supremacists to deny our humanity, as well as a history of resistance and affirmation of ourselves as human beings. There are many ways to respond to this history, many forms of resistance, and therefore, many different ways of being black.

The Reconstruction of Race and Revolutionary Blackness

Every moment of deconstruction requires by necessity a moment of reconstruction. Deconstruction does not leave us with nothing, but with something new. Likewise, the deconstruction of race leaves us with a new view of racial identity and indeed with a new identity. The work of hooks suggests a movement from racial construction to a moment of necessary deconstruction followed by a reconstruction of black racial identity. The latter moments, those of deconstruction and reconstruction belong together as emancipatory moments.

We have seen that the social construction of race had as its motive the domination of non-European peoples by Europeans. In this context, the geographical marker, Africa, and the phenotypic marker, blackness, became negative signifiers for Europeans. Blackness became a marker that pointed to a narrative which described the black person as sub-human. Blackness and the false narrative which defined it were essentialized for the purpose of establishing a racial hierarchy with whites at the apex.

The purpose of the deconstruction of race is not to deny or reject blackness or distinctions based on geography and outer physical features. The purpose of deconstruction is to disrupt the racist narrative wherein racial hierarchies are formed. It is to problematize a value system that supports white supremacy. For hooks, racial identity is not denied but it is deconstructed and reconstructed for emancipatory purposes. Here, the concern is not with difference, but rather with the interpretation and use of difference. For white supremacists, difference was a sign of inferiority of the nonwhite group.

As I mentioned before, many so-called antiracists believe that racism can be overcome if we become color-blind. However, the problem is not with recognizing color or racial difference, it is with the way in which difference is devalued. hooks

combats racism not by ignoring racial difference or by pretending that we are all the same. She combats racism by reaffirming blackness in a positive way. In her work, the narrative of black identity is retold as something positive and something to be loved. This is the real deconstructive/reconstructive moment which is more devastating to white supremacy than the liberal notion of color-blindness. Simply put, racist whites leave us with one option: blackness is bad and should be despised. White liberals leave us with a second option. Indeed, for well-meaning white liberals we should be color-blind, race is not real, there is no need to embrace one's blackness.

Both of the above options are not real options for blacks seeking liberation and equality and neither serves to empower marginalized black people. The more blatant white supremacists leave us with a negative self-image and no hope for emancipation. The white liberal who wants to pretend that he or she is color-blind only ignores the problem of race. While color-blindness may be an ideal, we are not yet in a position to advocate such. Further, the recognition of racial difference should not necessarily embody racism or the devaluing of a race. The present goal of color-blindness assumes that the playing field is even for blacks and whites. It also fails to take into consideration present structures of white supremacy. Quite often the focus on color-blindness is a demand for assimilation and the erasure of one's black identity. It is also a failure to recognize the reality of whiteness.¹⁵

Black identity has been formed through the historical process of resistance. Blackness is not an essentialist-based identity but rather a historical one.¹⁶ hooks writes:

The oppositional black culture that emerged in the context of apartheid and segregation has been one of the few locations that has provided a space for the kind of decolonization that makes loving blackness possible. Racial integration in a social context where white supremacist systems are intact undermines marginal spaces of resistance by promoting the assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture's attitudes about blackness and black people.¹⁷

The above passage reminds us of the way American society has refused to think deeply about racism and its long-term effects. The dominant tendency is to see racism as a problem with the individual. It is believed that only individuals can be racist. Racism requires a conscious commitment to white supremacy by an individual. We have ignored the ways in which racism or white supremacy is embedded in our social institutions and cultural practices. For example, black students are bombarded with images of great white figures in history while great blacks are marginalized. The very structure of our educational system is designed to perpetuate white supremacy. In a racist society everything is colonized, from our institutions to our minds. Too often racial integration means assimilation, it means conforming to a white supremacist system without challenging the system.

It is in this context that the voice of bell hooks is most prophetic. Black identity is to be maintained and loved. To love blackness is indeed revolutionary. White supremacy constructs social systems that are based on a hatred of blackness. Indeed,

blacks are encouraged to hate themselves. In the context of liberal “antiracism,” rather than love blackness, we are encouraged to pretend that racial identity does not exist. Loving and affirming blackness is taboo. To love blackness is to deconstruct and challenge the system that constructed blackness as something negative and subhuman in the first place. To love blackness is also to reconstruct blackness as beautiful, positive, and human. Loving blackness produces what might be called the clash of narratives. That is, the narrative about black identity constructed by white supremacists must be countered and destroyed by a narrative that redefines and reaffirms blackness. In the final analysis, loving blackness reveals that the emperor has no clothes.

Notes

1. See Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998).
2. Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of social, economic, and cultural capital is useful here. His analysis of these three forms of capital with regard to social class may also apply to race. Centuries of racial discrimination has put blacks at a great disadvantage while whites were able to accumulate necessary financial, social, and cultural resources. As a result many white children are born with a much wider “field of possibility” than black children since these resources are passed on from generation to generation. The playing field is grossly uneven at birth. Hence, the social trajectory of the average white child in the United States is much better than that of the average black child. See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).
3. hooks, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 34–35.
4. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), 157.
5. See Arnold Farr’s “Whiteness Visible: Enlightenment Racism and the Structure of Racialized Consciousness,” in George Yancy, *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 143–158.
6. Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223–261.
7. Hooks is just as critical of forms of racial essentialism perpetuated by blacks as she is with that perpetuated by whites. It is not uncommon to hear blacks debate about who is really black and who is not in the black community. Blacks often accuse other blacks of trying to be white if they differ in various cultural practices ranging from what one reads to the kind of music one listens to.
8. I would add “identities.”
9. My italics.
10. John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1997), 31.
11. hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 26.
12. hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 25.
13. *Ibid.*, 28.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Arnold Farr, “Whiteness Visible: Enlightenment Racism and the Structure of Racialized Consciousness.”
16. Arnold Farr, “Racism, Historical Ruins, and the Task of Identity Formation,” in *The Quest for*

Community and Identity: Critical Essays in Africana Social Philosophy, ed. Robert Birt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 15–28.

17. hooks, “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston MA: South End Press, 1992), 10.

III

Spirituality and Love

11

Love Matters

bell hooks on Political Resistance and Change

KATHY GLASS¹

In *Yearning*, bell hooks highlights the common “sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice.”² Whether they be men or women, working class or privileged, many Americans now desire “the kind of revolutionary change that will end domination and oppression.”³ In particular, they long to live in a world without racism, sexism, homophobia, imperialism, and exploitation. Rather than dismiss this ideal condition as an unattainable dream, hooks lauds it as a necessary collective desire, because the “shared space and feeling” might function as a site of “common ground” and potential transformation.⁴ But, without love, this anticipated sociopolitical shift may prove elusive.

In her love trilogy, hooks displays her usual commitment to interrogating and eradicating racism, sexism, and systems of exploitation. She also offers practical how-to lessons in loving to men and women in general, and black people in particular, all of whom have grown up and developed their capacity to love within a patriarchal, racist, and nihilistic culture.

This chapter traces hooks’s treatment of love in *Salvation*, *All About Love*, and *Communion*, three books which effectively marry theory with a cogent analysis of America’s ills. Her theory of love serves as “an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides...certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively.”⁵ Love opens the door to such “insight,” which enables people to see that they are interconnected and interdependent. And that love of self must be extended to the so-called other. Following in the footsteps of such towering figures as Martin L. King, Jr., James Baldwin, and June Jordan, hooks offers love as a powerful location from which to combat and transform the unjust material conditions inherent in the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” operating in America.⁶

While patriarchal popular culture often relegates love to the feminized realm of weakness and sentimentality, hooks effectively posits love as a powerful political and spiritual force capable of transforming “all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, [and] intimate relations.”⁷ Making concrete our nation’s need for a bold and transformative love, she anchors her claims in writings devoted exclusively to the subject. Here hooks reflects that, while communities committed to substantive social, political, and economic change have met

with varying degrees of success, the “great social movements for freedom and justice in our society” endorsed a “love ethic.”⁸ If contemporary society were to genuinely embrace the love ethic, she writes, our culture’s apathy toward domestic violence, unemployment, and homelessness would give way to compassionate attention.⁹ She further explains how the implementation of the love ethic could transform not only public policy, but also the lives of individuals whose realities are largely overdetermined by the dynamics of class, race, and gender. In short, love, the potential salve for our nation’s yearning, could “affect the good of everyone.”¹⁰

If, as hooks tells us, “[w]e cannot effectively resist domination if our efforts to create meaningful, lasting personal and social change are not grounded in a love ethic,”¹¹ then people—across distinctions of color, class, and gender—must embrace it to know true political freedom. Striking a prophetic note, hooks urgently argues that love is our salvation: the life raft that our society, mired in despair and discontent, must grab hold of and cling to.

The first section of this chapter defines and explores the parameters of hooks’s conception of love. Second, it interrogates her theory of love by analyzing Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1962), and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), through the lens of the following questions: What are the “salvational” effects of love? Can it transform the oppressed and the oppressor alike? Does love have the power to disrupt what George Lipsitz terms the “possessive investment in whiteness”? What, if any, are the consequences of loving? Each of the books under study emphasizes a key aspect of hooks’s radical love. Chesnutt’s novel explores the impact of love on white supremacy; Baldwin’s text wrestles with the political implications of loving the self and one’s oppressor, while Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* highlights the harmful impact of sexism and racism on a black family devoid of love. The final section of the chapter will briefly reflect on the risks of loving, as seen in *Beloved* (1987), another of Morrison’s novels. Grounding hooks’s theory in literary analysis will help to elucidate love’s political implications and its capacity to facilitate meaningful structural change.

Drawing on M. Scott Peck’s formulation, hooks crafts a multifaceted definition of love comprised, in part, of “the will to *extend one’s self* for the purpose of nurturing one’s own *or another’s spiritual growth*.”¹² Speaking to love’s political relevance, this conceptualization stresses the capacity of a human being to move *beyond* the self to work for a cause that may or may not directly benefit one’s self. The willingness to engage in selfless behavior presumably implies the existence of a “positive moral capacity of self,” which, writes Ruth Smith, is “the substantive motivation for sacrifice and justice and the resources with which human connection can be formed at all.”¹³ I therefore posit that loving, altruistic individuals possess an internal moral impulse that compels them to aspire toward ideals such as justice, equality, and compassion. In practical terms, love finds expression when individuals and communities devote themselves to realizing good (i.e., justice) on behalf of others in personal or political contexts.

A similar understanding of love informs Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s perspective that “We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life’s Jericho

Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.”¹⁴ In this sense, love becomes politicized because it compels the recognition of the humanity and need of strangers; it underscores the fact that “the self is always already socially linked and connected to a broader nexus of social relationships.”¹⁵ Dr. King’s allusion to Jericho evokes Jesus’s response to the lawyer’s inquiry about the identity of his “neighbor.” By way of explanation, Jesus shares the parable of the Good Samaritan, implying that one’s neighbor could be anyone in need of mercy. The Samaritan was moved by compassion to, in a sense, “suffer with” the victim. He not only felt sympathy for the injured man but also took action which symbolically *undid* the violence of the thieves and neglect of indifferent onlookers.¹⁶ This parable illustrates a key aspect of hooks’s politics of love, bringing into relief an expanded definition of the term *neighbor*. Her politicization of the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor as one’s self encourages the extension of compassion to local individuals, as well as the cultivation of “[c]oncern for the collective good of our nation.”¹⁷

While hooks’s love ethic disrupts the borders of rugged individualism, it also challenges “the more widely accepted assumption that we love instinctually,”¹⁸ and foregrounds expressions of love within and beyond intimate and familial contexts. As Peck asserts, “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will.”¹⁹ Expanding definitions of love beyond the romantic realm, hooks’s and Peck’s conception places it in the realm of practicality. In concert with the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, and Dr. King, all of which attest to humanity’s capacity to practice love directed toward the ends of justice, hooks’s politics places a premium on one’s capacity to exercise the will to love, as one would a muscle.

Although hooks would agree with Dr. King that love “redeems,”²⁰ she especially stresses the need for white “accountability and atonement,”²¹ as well as black responsibility. More specifically, in a speech delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1957, Dr. King advised blacks that: “...at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people...even though they’re mistreating you.... Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long.... And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see.... There’s something about love that builds up and is creative.”²²

Here Dr. King emphasizes the salvational effects of blacks’ love upon whites; his assumption is that love will cleanse the latter and save them from their own hatred. But hooks directly challenges whites to act as agents of change as well, further suggesting that “[f]ocusing on the power of forgiveness, King also often overlooked the importance of accountability.”²³ Not only should blacks forgive whites, but “[f]or genuine forgiveness to be transformative, white people undergoing a conversion process by which they divest themselves of white supremacist thinking would necessarily have to focus on accountability and atonement.”²⁴ This “conversion process” would involve, among other things, confronting racial privilege and committing one’s self to anti-racist struggle. At the same time, she advises that blacks return to love because “[w]e need a progressive, transformative vision of social justice that would combine the wisdom of a successful nonviolent, love-based freedom struggle with the insights of a direct-action, decolonizing movement for

black self-determination and liberation.”²⁵ hooks therefore combines King’s love ethic with the spirit of self-determination.²⁶

For hooks, such a love is inclusive of, but not limited to, religious expression; she does acknowledge, however, its metaphysical dimensions. Peck’s conviction that love requires the “will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth”²⁷ prompts hooks to explain that: “An individual does not need to be a believer in a religion to embrace the idea that there is an animating principle in the self—a life force (some of us call it soul) that when nurtured enhances our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us.”²⁸

Love, then, requires that its practitioners undergo a spiritual maturation process, inside or outside of the church, so as to be useful to the broader human community. Indeed, she does encourage “black folks who identify as Christian or as believers in other religious faiths” to “return to sacred writings about love and embrace these as guides showing us the way to lead our lives”;²⁹ but hooks also liberates love from narrow sectarian concerns, making it accessible to secularists who wish to practice love, *sans* the dogma and institutional proscriptions.

But how does one put this love into practice? Casting a necessarily broad net, she argues: “To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.”³⁰ But what happens when social relations are devoid of the elements listed above? One of the primary obstacles to love that has plagued American society since its inception, white supremacy, is vividly dramatized in Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*. In particular, this novel illustrates how an investment in whiteness has historically prevented Americans of European descent from communicating honestly with, respecting, and recognizing the humanity of Americans of African descent; it also explores the conditions under which transformational love might emerge and overcome centuries of cultural and structural racism. It is my contention that, while selfishness and individualism rooted in racial supremacy serve as formidable obstacles, love can nonetheless create conditions that give rise to improved sociopolitical realities.

Chesnutt drafted his novel during the “Nadir of Black Experience,”³¹ the post-Reconstruction, pre-World War I era that bore witness to the repeal of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, reversals of progressive Reconstruction legislation, the dramatic rise in lynching, and the passing of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).³² Despite these dismal conditions, notes Carla Peterson, “the period 1892–1903 represents a second flourishing of the African American novel, breathing new life into a form born forty years earlier with William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853).”³³ This, she explains, is consistent with Mikhail Bakhtin’s finding that “the novel tends to make its appearance at moments of social crisis.”³⁴ Joining the ranks of Frances Harper, Sutton Griggs, and Pauline Hopkins, Chesnutt engaged in the battle of cultural politics, emphasizing in his novel the humanity of black people, while undermining the myth of “Anglo-Saxon purity,” the imagined basis of white supremacist power.³⁵

The Marrow provides a fictionalized account of the historical events preceding the antiblack riot of Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898. In the town of “Wellington,” as the plot unfolds, there is an increase in white resentment and hostility toward

the peaceable black members of their community. Major Carteret, prominent white citizen and local editor, uses his paper as the instrument to fuel whites' fears that the black vote will result in "Negro domination."³⁶ Contrasted with Carteret is Dr. Miller, a fair-skinned, northern-educated black physician whose life has been dedicated to the "uplifting" of his people.³⁷ His biracial wife, Janet, is the unacknowledged half-sister of Carteret's wife, Olivia. As the novel progresses and racial tensions rise, ultimately culminating in the deadly riot, the Carteret and Miller families are forced to confront their suppressed historical ties and interwoven destinies.

While Dr. Miller exercises the will to love his oppressor throughout the story, his moral goodness appears to have a negligible impact on the racists who denigrate his blackness. His love, in general, emerges as a set of practices and internal attitudes. Specifically, Miller's Christianity finds expression in his willingness to forgive his enemies rather than resent them for refusing to extend to blacks full human and civil rights.³⁸ The exact opposite of Josh Green, an African-American laborer who represents the revolutionary black nationalist response to white violence, Miller endorses the biblical view that patient endurance is the preferable response to aggression.³⁹ Not only does he adopt a spirit of meekness rather than confrontation,⁴⁰ but Miller also places his faith in whites' ability to redeem themselves. He therefore:

...liked to believe that the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time, and that when a colored man should demonstrate to the community in which he lived that he possessed character and power, that community would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good. He had already made himself useful, and had received many kind words and other marks of appreciation.⁴¹

Implicit in this passage is Miller's assumption that white prejudice is somewhat justified. Nonetheless, he believes that whites' admiration of his hard work will inevitably overcome their racism. Despite the wrongs that he has suffered, he persists in loving his oppressor; he recognizes and respects the humanity of the whites who mistreat him, and his charitable spirit finds expression in a willingness to make himself "useful" to them. In so doing, Miller develops a reputation for "spending money in the community" and "contribut[ing] to its prosperity."⁴² The question is whether his self-sacrificial nature can have a redemptive effect upon moral members of the white community.

While overt racists are easy to locate in the novel, equally problematic are the novel's "liberal" characters,⁴³ Drs. Burns and Price, neither of whom undergoes a conversion in response to Miller's love. The behavior of these white physicians, as we shall see, underscores the distinction between an abstract commitment to justice on the one hand, and a willingness to take moral action on the other. In failing to commit themselves to the eradication of injustice, they position themselves in an antithetical relation to love. As hooks asserts, "[w]hen love is present the desire to dominate and exercise power cannot rule the day."⁴⁴ The commitment to ending domination and seeking justice, then, is necessarily a form of love in expression.⁴⁵

Early in the novel, Burns encounters an opportunity to strike a blow for racial equality when southern physician, Dr. Price, summons him from Philadelphia to

perform an urgent medical procedure on Carteret's baby. Taking the South-bound train to Wellington, North Carolina, Burns encounters the well-respected Miller, whom he promptly asks to join him at the operating table. Shortly after Burns arrives at the home of his new patient, Carteret informs him that: "in the South we do not call negro [sic] doctors to attend white patients. I could not permit a negro to enter my house upon such an errand."⁴⁶ As Peterson notes, "Major Carteret and his colleagues invent a white supremacist ideology to strengthen their class's very marrow," thereby displaying their own, rather than blacks' inability to "function as proper citizens."⁴⁷ Initially Burns pleads Miller's case, and ostensibly rejects this tradition of racial supremacy. But he ultimately fails to take a definitive stand against whiteness.

Tellingly, Burns does not take offense at the explicit racism that Carteret has directed toward his admirable black colleague, but instead responds: "I do not know what Miller's social value may be...or whether you gain or lose by your attitude towards him. I have invited him here in a strictly professional capacity, *with which his color is not at all concerned*."⁴⁸ Leaving to the Southern patriarchs the accurate calculation of blacks' "social value," Burns does not engage the question of racial equality in the public sector. He asserts himself *apolitically*, refusing to challenge the racism that circumscribed the opportunities and resources of Miller in particular, and African Americans, in general. He is indifferent to the fact that Miller's disadvantage, *which has everything to do with color*, directly advantages whites in the medical profession.

Rather than take a stand for Miller's human rights, he "merely stand[s] upon [his] professional rights" to have Miller work beside him.⁴⁹ In short, he is outraged that his individual liberties are being thwarted by an inconvenient prejudice, and therefore persists in his intention to proceed with Miller. Even after Burns capitulates to Carteret's desire to jettison Miller, his concerns remain confined to the narrow parameters of personal interest. Rather than meditating on the racist practice that his silence condones, Burns dwells angrily on the fact that *he* will "feel humiliated" when he encounters Miller in the future.⁵⁰ hooks's observation that a "[w]orship of individualism has in part led us to the unhealthy culture of narcissism that is so all pervasive in our society" applies not only to the postmodern present, but to Burns's cultural moment as well.⁵¹ That he "worships" individualism rather than God, or moral ideals such as justice and equality, suggests a lack of spiritual maturity—a soul sickness expressing as an exclusive love of self.

Although Burns finds morally reprehensible black oppression in principle, his individualism prevents him from involving himself in Miller's struggle for human rights. He wishes to be identified as a "gentleman" first, and a "white man" second,⁵² but this antiracist sentiment proves to be impotent, finding no expression in meaningful action. Regardless of his lack of action on Miller's behalf, Burns believes himself to be a decent and civilized gentleman. Displaying what Robert Birt would term the "bad faith of whiteness,"⁵³ Burns "flees the truths and perplexities of human existence; in short, he flees himself and alienates himself from his fellows."⁵⁴ Put another way, Burns, turning away from truth, remains deluded and convinced that he is basically a "good guy" despite his compliance. In reality, though, he reinforces the racist order in which he is immersed and further distances himself from blacks'

struggle for human rights; that is, he refuses to see that systemic racism is enabled by the apathy of complacent whites like himself. Failing to take an unpopular stand for justice, Burns refuses to sacrifice himself in any way, which, hooks reminds us, is “a necessary dimension of loving practice and living in community.”⁵⁵

Similar to Dr. Burns, Dr. Price has grown fond of Miller, whom he describes as a “capable man” who is “very much liked by the white physicians.”⁵⁶ But rather than find common ground with Miller in his time of need, Price “remain[s] true to an identity that provides [him] with resources, power, and opportunity.”⁵⁷ In short, his racism distorts his moral judgment. Having successfully argued, on racial grounds, for the exclusion of Miller during the operation, Price later faces the dilemma of informing the black doctor that his services are no longer required: “He had meant to state the situation to Miller frankly, but now that the moment had come he wavered. He was a fine physician, but he shrank from strenuous responsibilities. It had been easy to theorize about the negro [sic]; it was more difficult to look this man in the eyes—whom at this moment he felt to be as essentially a gentleman as himself—and tell him the humiliating truth.”⁵⁸

In applying racial theory to a specific human being, Price detects slippage between the discourse of race and Miller’s humanity. His suspicion that Miller, like himself, is “essentially a gentleman” is important for two reasons. First, it signals Price’s awareness that dominant representations of race, rather than accurately describing blacks, merely serve white supremacist ends; this accounts for Price’s shame at the prospect of telling Miller “the humiliating truth” that his blackness has barred him from the operating room. This passage also confirms that Price, like Burns, finds comfort in “the bad faith of whiteness.”⁵⁹ That is, Price continues to view himself as a noble “gentleman” despite his unwillingness to agitate for equitable social relations. He can therefore lie to Miller (with “apparent regret”) that the latter has arrived too late to aid in the procedure because Price is not genuinely remorseful.⁶⁰ Very much unlike a gentleman, Price fails to demonstrate integrity, refuses to defend his black “friend,” and avoids communicating honestly with him. Unable to plead ignorance of his dominant position in the racialized social order, Price notes that: “[h]is claim of superiority to the colored doctor rested fundamentally upon the fact that he was white and Miller was not; and yet this superiority, for which he could claim no credit, since he had not made himself, was the very breath of his nostrils,—he would not have changed places with the other for wealth untold.”⁶¹

Although whiteness is an “unmarked category” that is “very hard to see,”⁶² this passage makes it manifest as the necessary counterpart to Miller’s blackness. As Stephen Knadler writes, this novel puts whiteness on display, “forcing them [white readers] to stand in the literary marketplace, as not the makers of history and science, but as objects gazed upon, studied and assessed by the African-American subject.”⁶³

Thus, Chesnut’s “study” elucidates the white supremacist pattern of thought. That Price would not conceive of relinquishing his whiteness for “wealth untold” speaks to its incalculable value. He revels in the “rewards of whiteness,”⁶⁴ and relies upon what DuBois has termed the “psychological wage,” which affirms whiteness over all things black.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, Price’s investment in whiteness overrides his moral impulse to engage Miller’s humanity.

Chesnutt's portrayal of the white doctor's machinations is helpful for two additional reasons, the first of which is that Price displays a remarkably limited imagination in his assessment of his relations with Miller. Reflecting that he would never exchange places with the black doctor suggests that only two subject positions exist: the dominant and the subordinate. However Robin Kelly reminds us that "[t]here are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces."⁶⁶ Imagination has political implications because it can provide an alternative to white supremacy, liberating the psyche from reliance upon Manichean power relations.

In addition, Price's unwillingness to strive toward mutuality is important because it illustrates the reluctance of those in power generally to "voluntarily" give up privilege. Since doing so guarantees the experience of loss and change, the advantaged are frequently slow to release the reigns of power. As hooks notes, "[f]ear of radical changes leads many citizens of our nation to betray their minds and hearts.... Obviously, it is not in the interest of the conservative status quo to encourage us to confront our collective fear of love."⁶⁷ Her assessment of twenty-first century social dynamics similarly applies to Price's cultural moment, when social and political structures were in flux. That is to say, white supremacy remained intact, but necessarily transmuted itself in the wake of abolition. Although it could no longer find expression in master-slave relations, whiteness nonetheless reigned supreme, absorbing and overcoming blacks' recent political gains. It is likely that Price makes little effort to pursue racial justice because he is afraid of redefining himself during a socially turbulent moment, without the crutch and privilege of whiteness. But hooks would counter that, "[w]hen we love, we no longer allow our hearts to be held captive by fear."⁶⁸ This point Sojourner Truth understood well in her day; urging the male opponents of nineteenth-century suffragists to become equally fearless, she observed: "I know that it is hard for one who has held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife. It will feel all the better when it closes up again."⁶⁹ Letting go of racial privilege requires venturing out into this unknown psychic territory, bearing the pain of change, and assisting the process rather than resisting it. But Price's fear, however, overwhelms him, driving him deeper into the refuge of whiteness.

Although individualism, greed, and fear trump love in the examples cited above, *The Marrow's* conclusion gestures toward the possibility that redemptive love, bubbling up in the midst of extraordinary suffering, can disrupt resentment, intervene in white supremacist ideology, and soften the heart hardened by hatred. The emergence of love in the thick of suffering⁷⁰ will be discussed in two contexts: that of Carteret, whose awareness of another's suffering opens him to the possibility of love, and that of the Millers, whose sensitivity to their enemy's pain moves them to take loving action, despite their own suffering.

More specifically, Carteret is catapulted into a state of compassion when grappling with the "imminence of his child's peril,"⁷¹ and the reality of Miller's despair. Early in the novel, Carteret coldly refuses to welcome Miller into his home because the black doctor is not his "social equal."⁷² But when the prospect of his son's untimely death looms before him, Carteret is compelled to confront his racial attitudes; he desperately requires the assistance of the black doctor on whose abilities he must

now depend. After asking Miller to rush to his home to save his own son, however, he learns that Miller's child has just been slain in the race riot which Carteret, himself, had fomented. Contending with this news:

[i]n the agony of his own predicament,—in the horror of the situation at Miller's house,—for a moment the veil of race prejudice was rent in twain, and he saw things as they were, in their correct proportions and relations,—saw clearly and convincingly that he had no standing here, in the presence of death,... Miller's refusal to go with him was pure, elemental justice; he could not blame the doctor for his stand. He was indeed conscious of a certain involuntary admiration for a man who held in his hands the power of life and death, and could use it, with strict justice, to avenge his own wrongs. In Dr. Miller's place he would have done the same thing.⁷³

Here, Carteret brackets his "lifelong beliefs"⁷⁴ about white supremacy; he sets aside his racial "interest"⁷⁵ and finally sees Miller as the human being whom he has wronged. During this epiphany, which we might describe as a moment of grace, a degree of good emerges in Carteret's soul. On the subject of love and suffering, Pope John Paul II writes that suffering is "*supernatural* because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply *human* because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity."⁷⁶ Seemingly, Carteret undergoes a mystical experience of sorts, during which the "veil of race prejudice" is swept aside supernaturally. This opens his heart, enabling him to recognize Miller's humanity. Pope John Paul II further theorizes that: "[f]ollowing the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's 'I' on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer."⁷⁷

Faced with Miller's suffering, Carteret is able to imaginatively project himself into the latter's place; recognizing Miller as his moral equivalent, he experiences his "I" as though it were Miller's. He not only understands Miller's refusal, but further considers it to be justified, given the mistreatment rendered. In this pivotal moment, Carteret's assumptions about black inferiority dissipate; while it would be an exaggeration to suggest that he feels love for Miller in the moment, he does take a significant, albeit preliminary, step in the direction of demonstrating a new capacity to love Miller. In the throws of his own pain, he is affected by Miller's suffering, and comes to view him as a man deserving of justice. The pain that begins to redeem him opens him to the possibility of love. But, as hooks reminds us, love alone is not enough to "bring an end to difficulties";⁷⁸ it is, however, an essential starting point. Newly illuminated, Carteret is positioned to act on his recent acknowledgment of Miller's humanity by expressing love in the form of antiracist struggle.

Though Miller initially refuses to help Carteret's son, the ultimate decision to assist the child functions as a powerful act of love—taken in the midst of suffering—that might further redeem Carteret, and enable racial reconciliation. Invoking the spirit of Christ, who demonstrated love for humanity through his sacrifice on the cross, the Millers similarly embody compassion during their moment of crisis. In

the language of hooks, they “utilize...the dimensions of love—‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge.’”⁷⁹ After Miller rejects Carteret, whose reckless racism indirectly caused the death of his own son, he is “moved in spite of himself” during the subsequent appeal of Olivia, Carteret’s wife.⁸⁰ In effect, his heart opens, and he demonstrates his capacity to “care.” As Pope John Paul II might suggest, Miller’s suffering makes him “*sensitive to the suffering of others*”;⁸¹ he therefore “gives himself, his very ‘I,’ opening this ‘I’ to the other person.”⁸² Softening, he places in the hands of his wife Janet—Olivia’s shunned half-sister—the decision regarding Carteret’s baby. She ultimately sends Miller forth to be of service.

In yielding, the couple not only shows its capacity to care, but it also displays a commitment to justice, and a responsibility to, and respect for, mankind. While they may not “trust” the Carterets as individuals, trust being an element of the love ethic, the Millers do trust in their own capacity to act morally in the world. Having full knowledge of their enemy’s transgressions, they choose to extend themselves, practicing love rather than exacting vengeance. Through her tears, Janet therefore declares:

I throw you back your father’s name, your father’s wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them,—they are bought too dear!... But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have your child’s life, if my husband can save it!⁸³

Responding cautiously to Janet’s generosity, Stephen P. Knadler writes that “Chesnutt’s novel ends less on a note of forgiveness than of Utopian open-endedness.”⁸⁴ It may well be the case that Janet “renounces neither her anger nor her bitterness,”⁸⁵ but these negative feelings nonetheless coexist with her will to absolve Olivia of her transgressions. In *The Art of Forgiving*, Lewis B. Smedes asserts that absolution “is not anti-anger, anymore than love is anti-anger.”⁸⁶ In other words, the cognitive decision to forgive frequently precedes a process that unfolds in the midst of conflicting emotions such as rage, sorrow, and resentment.⁸⁷

Despite her anger for her sister, Janet surrenders her desire for vengeance, and acts with compassion. Admittedly, the salvational effects of this love are unclear; in response to Janet’s charity, Olivia passionately promises her half-sister: “I will see you again, and make you take them [the mean words] back”⁸⁸ The matter of lasting reconciliation between black and white necessarily remains a matter of speculation, as the book draws to an abrupt close at the conclusion of Janet’s speech. Nonetheless, the final chapter suggests that, in Carteret’s case, psychic pain can put the hard-hearted in touch with humanity—both their own and that of the other. At the same time, the Millers’ altruism reveals the capacity of the suffering to respond lovingly to others. These suggestive openings have significant sociopolitical implications, for they demonstrate the importance of empathy and identification in reconciliation. The intentional cultivation of one’s ability to see in the other one’s self is crucial to the dissolution of individualism and the forging of human connections where none previously existed.

While Chesnutt’s novel gestures toward the capacity of love to affect social

transformation, Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* testifies to the centrality of love as a personally empowering strategy and politically viable force. Emerging during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Baldwin's manifesto bristles with righteous indignation at the slow pace of political change, and the failure of the state to extend to African Americans the democratic principles of freedom and equality. Like his intellectual predecessor, W. E. B. DuBois who declared the major "problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,"⁸⁹ Baldwin also recognized the eradication of racism as key to America's salvation. Unlike his nationalist counterparts who responded to white Americans with rage, Baldwin advocates in his writings the cultivation of love, a *powerful political* force that could help to transform unequal social relations, and unjust material conditions. Baldwin's political manifesto, constituted by letters to his nephew and to the nation, explores the urgent need for the oppressed and oppressor, alike, to love themselves and one another. Failing these concrete acts of love, he warns that our country will be unable to escape the "racial nightmare" that has been created by centuries of unjust policy and racist practice.⁹⁰

Bringing to life hooks's claim that "the trauma of white supremacy and ongoing racist assault leaves deep psychic wounds,"⁹¹ Baldwin argues that self-love is essential to the psyche and survival of black Americans immersed in an antiblack culture. In "My Dungeon Shook," the letter to his nephew, Baldwin describes his stepfather's "terrible life" to illustrate the consequences of internalizing whiteness.⁹² Having "believed what white people said about him," Baldwin's stepfather "was defeated long before he died."⁹³ Absorbing and accepting the racist logic that he was inferior to whites, his stepfather relinquished his will to define himself, and eventually his desire to live. He was, in effect, rendered powerless by the force of racism. For this reason, Baldwin counsels his nephew to choose love, which will "strengthen [him] against the loveless world."⁹⁴ In this sense, self-love functions as both a survival strategy, and source of agency. When they reject "the white man's definitions"⁹⁵ of black identity, black men and women are more likely to develop positive self-images and "creat[e] the conditions necessary...to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life."⁹⁶ The loving valuation of self thus facilitates the taking of meaningful action in the world.

The practice of love, however, cannot remain a purely internal matter. For Baldwin, the oppressed and oppressor must love one another in order to achieve sociopolitical freedom. He therefore urges his nephew to "accept" white people who oppose him "with love,"⁹⁷ and advises the white to "become black himself" during the difficult process of change.⁹⁸ "Acceptance, for Baldwin, does not connote passivity or fatalism," writes Lawrie Balfour. "Instead, Baldwin's notion of acceptance entails an active opposition to innocence, a confrontation with life's harshest truths."⁹⁹ In other words, rather than remaining ignorant of the structures of white supremacy that they have inherited, whites, Baldwin argues, must acknowledge the history of racism in this country, and its manifestation in the present. It is love, not disgust that will empower blacks to help their white "brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."¹⁰⁰

Like hooks, Baldwin holds blacks and also whites accountable for their behavior.

Specifically, whites, too, must do the difficult work of loving. Since the “white man’s unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro,” writes Baldwin: “[t]he only way he can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power.”¹⁰¹

That is, whites must realize that their history, identity, and humanness is intimately bound up with that of blacks and that the latter have borne the burden of representing in the white imaginary that which is frightening and undesirable. Rather than viewing African Americans as inferior others, therefore, whites must acknowledge and engage their humanity. Particularly useful in this recognition process is Maria Lugones’s concept of loving “world travelling,” which she identifies as antithetical to the “agonistic sense of play” prevalent in the West.¹⁰² “World travelling,” the ability to “shift from being one person to being a different person,”¹⁰³ requires openness. This salubrious activity is impeded by agonistic play because the “agonistic traveller,” writes Lugones, “is a conqueror, an imperialist.”¹⁰⁴ The rules of his game “inspire hostility,”¹⁰⁵ and “uncertainty...about who is going to win and who is going to lose.”¹⁰⁶ For this reason, “the playful attitude given western man’s construction of playfulness, is not a healthy, loving attitude to have in travelling across ‘worlds.’”¹⁰⁷ Lugones therefore advises: “for people who are interested in crossing racial and ethnic boundaries, an arrogant western man’s construction of playfulness is deadly. One cannot cross the boundaries with it. One needs to give up such an attitude if one wants to travel.”¹⁰⁸

Lugones, then, discourages the tendency to conquer, kill,¹⁰⁹ and, I would add, exploit other worlds; such efforts to dominate people deemed unlike one’s self speak to a degree of “self-importance” and “fixed” constructions of the self.¹¹⁰ Similarly concerned about the lack of empathy apparent among practitioners of racism, Baldwin criticizes the “white man” who, “armed with spiritual traveler’s checks, visits [the black world] surreptitiously after dark.”¹¹¹ Referring here to whites who habitually traveled into predominantly black, urban areas at night to engage in illicit relations and cultural voyeurism, Baldwin intimates that such contact leaves intact the “I–it” relation theorized by Martin Buber.¹¹² The human element proves elusive in such encounters because they are based on exoticized notions rather than intimate connection. The only answer to these abortive attempts at relating is love. Thus, writes Baldwin: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”¹¹³

Love allows people to form human relationships based not on racialized fantasies, but on common values that dwell behind the masks created by fear. And even when sociopolitical realities generate disagreement, the compassion and “grace” inherent in love will allow for the possibilities of constructive conversation and communion with one another.

While a powerful familial love served as a buffer between Baldwin and the

world during his childhood, the young protagonist in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* endures racist treatment in a loveless world. Revealing the consequences of such deprivation, Morrison renders "an unforgettable and penetrating description of the racial deformation of Pecola Breedlove's mind and body under the aesthetic regime of whiteness."¹¹⁴ Similarly reflecting on the dangers of internalizing racist ideology, hooks asserts that, "[d]oing the work of love, we ensure our survival and our triumph over the forces of evil and destruction."¹¹⁵ But Pecola, arguably, is powerless to do the work of "lov[ing] [her] black bod[y] in a white supremacist patriarchal culture."¹¹⁶ Lacking in "healthy self-esteem," which hooks identifies as "the heart of self-love,"¹¹⁷ Pecola has no role model to emulate. In the absence of a loving mother, attentive father, and supportive community, Pecola has been infected with the values of white supremacy to the extent that rather than fully inhabit her detested black body, she attempts to will herself to "disappear" by offering prayers to God and "squeeze[ing] her eyes shut."¹¹⁸ Her feelings of worthlessness pave the path to mental collapse. *The Bluest Eye*, therefore, remains one of the most tragically powerful representations of a black child struggling to navigate her way through the structures and lived experience of white supremacy. Illustrating the notion that the denial of love coexists with despair, the novel further serves as a stinging indictment of the white supremacist values antithetical to love, operating within both blacks and whites in America.

As many scholars have argued,¹¹⁹ Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, himself wounded by racist and patriarchal oppression, fails to instill in his daughter a sense of unconditional love; he subsequently imposes on her his own perverted understanding of the concept. An obstacle to love, patriarchal structures disrupt the workings of the human heart. Based on her studies, hooks observes that "[p]atriarchal thinking certainly does not encourage men to be self-loving. Instead it encourages them to believe that power is more important than love, particularly the power to dominate and control others."¹²⁰ A wife-beating drunkard, Cholly provides a brutal and destabilizing environment for his wife and children. Although the reader is led to believe that he "loved" Pecola,¹²¹ his molestation of her bears out hooks's argument that "Love and abuse cannot coexist."¹²²

Dehumanized by the environment which, in part, produces him, Cholly seems almost compelled to lash out violently at his daughter.¹²³ While Morrison does not pardon his behavior,¹²⁴ she does bring to light the societal conditions that helped to damage Cholly's psyche. Abandoned by his mother when he was a child, terrorized by white men, and rejected by his own father as a youth, Cholly in truth does not know how to "return" his daughter's love.¹²⁵ Not only is he emotionally damaged, but his sense of self is further diminished by his limited access to socioeconomic power. This condition yields predictable results. As hooks observes, "Many men in our society have no status, no privilege; they receive no freely given compensation, no perks with capitalist patriarchy. For these men domination of women and children may be the only opportunity to assert a patriarchal presence."¹²⁶ As Cholly indeed "suffer[s]" in this manner,¹²⁷ the behavior that follows (i.e., beating his wife and abusing his daughter), may produce for him a false sense of power, further alienating him from the possibility of cultivating love-based relationships. Cholly is indeed a victimizer, but he "victimize[s] from the location of victimization."¹²⁸

The complexity of Cholly's desperate dilemma therefore begs the question: Under ideal conditions, how might love have intervened here? Venturing momentarily into the realm of the speculative, had Cholly learned to recognize himself as a loving and loveable being—as Baldwin advises his nephew to do—he might have grown into a very different person. Instead of learning to love during his childhood and young adulthood, Cholly internalized what hooks terms “the values of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”¹²⁹ Rather than learning how to fully process childhood insults, he frequently dwelt upon “myriad...humiliations, defeats, and emasculations” which “could stir him into flights of depravity.”¹³⁰ Another salutary possibility is the development of a feminist consciousness. The “feminist thinking” that hooks endorses “offers strategies that enable [men] to challenge and change patriarchal masculinity.”¹³¹ Rightly so, she concludes that this shift in awareness could provide for men a “vision of liberatory masculinity.”¹³² Not only does she encourage individual men to develop new ways of thinking; but for meaningful change to occur, society in general must develop structures to facilitate the development of egalitarian sexual relations. This means that young boys, when wounded by childhood traumas, must, like females, also be “given cultural support for cultivating an interest in love” rather than rebellion, anger, and vindictiveness.¹³³ Our media images as well as parental skills might also help to create popular images of loving men who seek to resolve conflict through communication rather than violence. But having been historically denied access to such resources and role models, hooks notes, “[m]any men in our culture never recover from childhood unkindnesses.”¹³⁴ This being the case with deeply wounded Cholly, he unthinkingly lashes out, as a grown man, at those closest, and most vulnerable to him.

Thus far, this chapter has considered the power of love to intervene in the force of white supremacy, as well as the consequences of living a loveless existence. It also suggests that patriarchal forces must be vigorously challenged, for they work in conjunction with whiteness, in opposition to loving, nondominant relations. The concluding section of this chapter will reflect briefly on the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself, exploring, in particular, the risks inherent in extending the self to another. In short, loving one another makes us vulnerable to each other. And this open hearted orientation invariably carries with it the risk of disappointment and betrayal. Consider, for example, Baby Suggs's loving—yet grossly misconstrued generosity—toward her neighbors in *Beloved*. Her kindness hardens, rather than opens, their hearts.

Twenty days after fugitive slave Sethe arrives at the home of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, the latter's gratitude for Underground Railroad agent, Stamp Paid, takes sudden and dramatic shape. Specifically, Suggs “had decided to do something with the fruit [gathered by Paid] worthy of the man's labor and his love.”¹³⁵ But this spontaneous expression of gratitude quickly assumes grand proportions:

She made the pastry dough and thought she ought to tell Ella and John to stop on by because three pies, maybe four, were too much to keep for one's own. Sethe thought they might as well back it up with a couple of chickens. Stamp allowed that perch and catfish were jumping into the boat—didn't even have to drop a line....it grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 [Suggs's home

address] shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry.¹³⁶

Cleary, Suggs's feast springs from her desire to express gratitude for Paid's efforts on her relatives' behalf (first his rescue of them, and later his porch presentation to them of two pails of blackberries, picked by his own hand). Rather than celebrating the arrival of Sethe in a private manner, thereby relegating her fortune to the realm of individual good, Suggs's affection for her community prompts her to share with others the good that has literally been placed on her porch. Surely, the impulse to give thanks, and engage in altruistic activity, is an expression of love. Unfortunately for Suggs, her neighbors reject this loving-kindness, wondering: "Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone."¹³⁷

Instead of receiving the love that Suggs offers, the neighbors partake only of the food. They later find fault with her generosity, criticizing the former slave for lessening the burdens of the sick, and providing shelter for the homeless. Rather than being grateful for and inspired by Suggs's "great heart,"¹³⁸ they ascribe to the old woman "uncalled-for pride,"¹³⁹ and meditate on her "reckless generosity."¹⁴⁰ The ironic results of Suggs's kindness exemplify the potential consequences inherent in extending one's self, on behalf of others: misunderstanding, projection, and punishment may result from acting on the impulses of the heart.

In Suggs's case, the community members' punishment manifests itself as their refusal to warn the former that slave catchers, in hopes of reclaiming their human "property," are advancing on 124 Bluestone Road. Put another way, Suggs's "friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess."¹⁴¹ Rather than rallying around Suggs, her women friends abandon her. They refuse to form around her what hooks might call a "circle of love"; and they fail to serve as "companions of her soul."¹⁴² In *Communion*, hooks argues that a "negative, competitive impulse, which seeks the psychic annihilation and destruction of the other, the female who possesses what one lacks, often characterizes...general female interaction."¹⁴³ She further explains that "[a]ffirming another woman's success is the difficult issue for many females," and that young girls soon "learn how to use terroristic tactics of exclusion, ostracism, and shunning to police one another" when envy intervenes.¹⁴⁴ Undergoing a similar fate, Suggs and Sethe are excluded from the protective mechanisms of the neighborhood, and thus rendered vulnerable to the encroaching slave catchers. Competitive, sexist thinking thus hinders the reciprocal expression of love between Suggs and her neighbors. Morrison's passage serves as a useful reminder that both men and women men are capable of reproducing patriarchal belief systems that thwart love-based relationships rooted in "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication."¹⁴⁵

Lingering in the wake of Suggs's dilemma, however, is the unanswered question: What does it mean to give too much? Love too much? Is there a point at which loving becomes unwise? These questions sparked by Morrison's *Beloved* have implications

for this chapter as a whole. While this chapter does not endeavor to provide a conclusive answer to these questions, it is worth noting that loving carries with it the possibility of pain. Despite the heartbreak in *Beloved*, love nonetheless emerges as victorious in the novel. Years after Suggs's death, her granddaughter, Denver, is motivated by the memory of Suggs's loving teachings to venture beyond home, to find work, and feed her family. Conversations with Suggs about resilience, forgiveness, and courage prompt Denver to reach out to her community, thereby breaching the divide between her family and neighbors. As the novel closes, Paul D urges Sethe to reawaken to the awareness that she is loveable, and worthy of love. In short, he gently encourages Sethe to remember that she, herself, is her own "best thing."¹⁴⁶ True enough, love alone "does not bring an end to difficulties."¹⁴⁷ But, as illustrated in *Beloved*, love provides the "strength to cope with difficulties in a constructive way."¹⁴⁸ Most everything can be improved by the presence of love. But "[e]ven when we cannot change ongoing exploitation and domination, love gives life meaning, purpose, and direction,"¹⁴⁹ as hooks writes. Love, alone, may not provide the solution to all of society's ills. But it surely creates the conditions that are conducive to meaningful change.

Notes

1. I extend sincere thanks to George Yancy and Lupe Davidson, whose support I deeply appreciate. Thanks also to Matthew Bachner and Beth Buhot, who assisted me during the source-gathering stage.
2. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 12.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid.
5. Cornel West, "Conversation with bell hooks," in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 544.
6. hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 152.
7. hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 87.
8. Ibid., 98.
9. Ibid..
10. Ibid., 99.
11. hooks, *Salvation*, xxiv.
12. Quoted in hooks, *All About Love*, 4, emphasis mine.
13. Ruth Smith, "Morality and Perceptions of Society: The Limits of Self-Interest," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (1987): 289.
14. Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor." In *Strength to Love* (Cleveland, Ohio: William Collins, 1963), 35.
15. George Yancy, "The Black Self within a Semiotic Space of Whiteness: Reflections on the Racial Deformation of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" *CLA*, 43, no. 3 (2000): 302.
16. Here I paraphrase a point made by Dr. Reverend William S. Epps, Senior Pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Inglewood, California, on Sunday, July 15, 2007.
17. hooks, *All About Love*, 98.
18. Ibid., 5.
19. Peck, quoted in Ibid., 4.
20. Ibid., 219.
21. hooks, *Salvation*, 221.
22. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner, 1998), 53–54.

23. hooks, *Salvation*, 220–221.
24. Ibid., 221.
25. Ibid., 212.
26. While hooks in no way approves of the fact that “black liberation was made synonymous with the creation of strong black patriarchs,” she does identify Huey Newton, Elaine Brown, and Stokely Carmichael as “leaders who took up the mantle of black self-determination,” hooks, *Salvation*, 9.
27. Peck quoted in hooks, *All About Love*, 4.
28. hooks, *All About Love*, 13.
29. hooks, *Salvation*, 54.
30. hooks, *All About Love*, 5.
31. Gates et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 544.
32. Ibid., 545–546.
33. Cara L. Peterson, “Commemorative Ceremonies and Invented Traditions: History, Memory, and Modernity in the ‘New Negro’ Novel of the Nadir,” in *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1999*, ed. Barbara Mc Caskill and Caroline Gebhard (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 38.
34. Bakhtin cited in Peterson, “Commemorative Ceremonies and Invented Traditions,” 38.
35. Charles Chesnutt quoted in Stephen P. Knadler, “Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness,” *American Literary History* 8, no. 3 (1996), 428.
36. Quoted in Gates et al., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 678.
37. Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901, repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 33.
38. Ibid., 73.
39. Ibid., 72.
40. Ibid., 39–40.
41. Ibid., 42.
42. Ibid., 163.
43. Ibid., 44.
44. hooks, *All About Love*, 98.
45. Both Burns and Price admire Miller’s medical skill, but neither character in the novel demonstrates toward him the love that manifests itself in the desire for justice. In economic terms, rather than act against their own “investment in whiteness,” these ostensibly well-meaning men uphold the “system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility.” See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), viii.
46. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 46.
47. Peterson, “Commemorative Ceremonies and Invented Traditions,” 42.
48. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 46, emphasis mine.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 47.
51. hooks, *All About Love*, 214.
52. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 47.
53. Robert Birt, “The Bad Faith of Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58.
54. Birt, “The Bad Faith of Whiteness,” 57.
55. hooks, *All About Love*, 142.
56. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 41. The feeling is mutual: Miller, likewise, considers Price to be his “friend.” See also *ibid.*, 33.
57. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, vii.
58. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 48.
59. Birt, “The Bad Faith of Whiteness,” 58.
60. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 49.
61. Ibid., 48.
62. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 1.

63. Knadler, "Untragic Mulatto," 429.
64. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 4.
65. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), 700.
66. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 4.
67. hooks, *Salvation*, 91.
68. hooks, *All About Love*, 220–221.
69. Sojourner Truth, "First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association (First Speech)," in *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, eds. Suzanne P. Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziuk (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 121.
70. I thank scholar Andrea Williams for encouraging me to pursue this point.
71. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 205.
72. Ibid., 46.
73. Ibid., 207.
74. Ibid., 205.
75. Ibid.
76. Pope John Paul, "Apostolic Letter of John Paul II: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," in *Salvifici Doloris* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1984), 54–55, original emphasis.
77. Pope John Paul, "On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," 49–50, original emphasis.
78. hooks, *Salvation*, xvii.
79. hooks, *All About Love*, 94.
80. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 210.
81. Pope John Paul, "On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," 49, original emphasis.
82. Ibid., 49.
83. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 230, 212.
84. Knadler, "Untragic Mulatto," 443.
85. Ibid., 443.
86. Ibid., 167.
87. Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (New York: Ballantine Books 1996), 7–10.
88. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 212–213.
89. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Penguin, 1996), 35.
90. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; repr., New York: Vintage, 1993 []), 105.
91. hooks, *Salvation*, 55.
92. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 4.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid., 7.
95. Ibid., 9.
96. hooks, *Salvation*, 66.
97. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 8.
98. Ibid., 96.
99. Lawrie Balfour, "Finding the Words: Baldwin, Race Consciousness, and Democratic Theory," in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 89.
100. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 10.
101. Ibid., 96.
102. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 16.
103. Ibid., 11.
104. Ibid., 15.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 16.
108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.
110. Ibid.
111. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 96.
112. See Martin Buber (1996).
113. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 95.
114. Yancy, "The Black Self within a Semiotic Space of Whiteness," 300.
115. Ibid., xxiv.
116. Ibid., 89.
117. Ibid., 86.
118. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970; repr., New York: Vintage, 2007), 45.
119. See Jerome Bump, "Family Systems Therapy and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." In John V Knapp and Kenneth Womack, eds., *Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Therapy and Literary Study* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2003), 151–170; and Jane S. Bakerman, "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *American Literature*, 52, no. 4 (1981).
120. hooks, *Salvation*, 145.
121. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 206.
122. hooks, *All About Love*, 6.
123. Cormier-Hamilton argues that, "like many early naturalistic protagonists, he is driven by an inner force almost against his desires." See Cormier-Hamilton, "Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey Away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*." *MELUS* 19, no. 4 (1994): 119.
124. Ibid., 119.
125. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 161.
126. hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 138.
127. Ibid., 138.
128. Ibid., 139.
129. hooks, *Salvation*, 152.
130. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 42–43.
131. hooks, *Salvation*, 146.
132. hooks, *All About Love*, 146.
133. Ibid., 153.
134. Ibid., 23.
135. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., New York: Penguin, 1998), 136.
136. Ibid., 136.
137. Ibid., 137.
138. Ibid., 87.
139. Ibid., 137.
140. Ibid., 137.
141. Ibid., 138.
142. Ibid., 230.
143. hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 124.
144. Ibid., 130. Here, hooks writes in particular about girls, and later women, who feel that they must compete with other females to be recognized as valuable "in the eyes of patriarchy" (131). Hence, these females have imbibed "sexist notions of womanhood" (128).
145. hooks, *All About Love*, 5.
146. Morrison, *Beloved*, 273.
147. hooks, *Salvation*, xvii.
148. Ibid., xvii.
149. Ibid., xxiv.

12

Love, Politics, and Ethics in the Postmodern Feminist Work of bell hooks and Julia Kristeva

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Most of us are familiar with the usually cited characteristics of postmodernism: decentered, fragmented, ironic, self-reflexive, heterogeneous, fluid. Postmodernism has abandoned (or realized the illusory nature of) metanarratives and foundations, particularly such Enlightenment foundations as truth or reason.² Indeed, postmodernism's antifoundationalism has often been seen as its most basic, even foundational, characteristic. Nonetheless, most of us would also recognize terms that serve as virtually foundational within postmodern and poststructuralist discourses: *power, desire, the unconscious, language*. Such terms have not evoked the same suspicion as have those foundational concepts associated with the Enlightenment, liberal humanism, or western metaphysics, such as *truth, reason, justice—or love*. What could possibly seem more bourgeois, more sentimental, more embedded in a history of passé, failed, or oppressive discourses than "love"? Although many feminist and postmodern theorists have been much more comfortable with terms like *trauma* or *violence*, *love* has reemerged in discourses of even the theoretically sophisticated and the politically committed. Love becomes both an ethical and a political foundation—and a source of hope—in the work of such postmodern feminists as bell hooks and Julia Kristeva.

The idea of "love" has been, in most modern Western thought, so enmeshed in notions of *romance* or, post-Freud, of *desire* that relatively few postmodern or feminist theorists have explored the ethical (or political) possibilities of nonsexual love for the other (for example, in friendship, love of community, love of one's neighbors—literal or figurative—or familial love). Some of Kristeva's and, especially, hooks's recent work provides ways to reimagine love from both a feminist and postmodernist perspective and in relation to both ethics and politics.

I consider both Kristeva and hooks to be "post-" or "new" postmodernists or "post-poststructuralists" because of their indebtedness to postmodern theory and their critical, revisionist relation to it.³ Both hooks and Kristeva have explored gender and sexuality, cultural studies, political theory, theories of race and nation, psychoanalysis, religious discourse, and ethics, if with varying degrees of emphasis and engagement. Both hooks and Kristeva have experienced cultural displacements

and have been intellectual nomads.⁴ Although both thinkers are best known for their prolific output of theoretical texts, both have also written in a variety of genres and styles for diverse audiences: Kristeva has written novels, and hooks has written children's books, poetry, and memoirs.⁵ Both have spent much of their adult lives in universities, but also have significant commitments outside of academia (for instance, Kristeva as a practicing psychoanalyst and editor of an avant-garde journal, hooks as a community activist, frequent lecturer, and film reviewer). Both are also among the very small number of women public intellectuals in their respective countries. Both have been writing about love since the late 1980s. Despite obvious differences between them, especially of race and nationality, both have much to offer for the ongoing development of both postmodernist and feminist ethics and politics.

Although many critics have disputed Kristeva's commitments to feminism (and she has written much less frequently *about* feminism than hooks has), I believe that her work both reflects and is *useful for* feminism, as it is useful for critiquing xenophobia and racism.⁶ I consider Kristeva a feminist, particularly for her revisions of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and ideas about gender. In her work, she redresses their marginalization of the mother/the maternal and their virtual reification of the father/the paternal. Kristeva also critiques Marxist theory for failing to address reproduction even as it addresses relations of production, and for ignoring the ways in which sexual difference translates into differences "in the relationship to power, language, and meaning"⁷ (as does racial difference). hooks's commitments to feminism, radical politics, cultural critique, and antiracist struggles are obvious to anyone who has read her work, while her connection to postmodern thought has been less explored. Both Kristeva's and hooks's work can be especially valuable for the developing field of postmodern ethics, and for the further development of feminist ethics (although few scholars working in either of these areas currently discuss or even cite either hooks's or Kristeva's work),⁸ as well as for the newer area of postmodern feminist ethics.

It will be helpful to clarify how I am using the terms *postmodernity*, *postmodernism*, and *poststructuralism*. *Postmodernity* is the historical and cultural period in which we now live, or what Jean-François Lyotard calls "the postmodern condition,"⁹ the post-Enlightenment, post-Holocaust, postnuclear, digital, globalized world of late postindustrial capitalism. The term *postmodernism*, a narrower concept, was first used to describe some radical innovations in literature, architecture, photography, and other artistic and cultural practices from the 1960s on, especially in the United States, Europe, and Japan. These artistic and cultural avant-gardes—often characterized by fragmentation, self-reflexiveness, intertextuality, playfulness, genre- and border-blurring—have both reflected and shaped postmodernity. The terms *postmodern* and *postmodernism* have been extended to include poststructuralist theory, which developed at about the same time as postmodernist art and literature. Postmodernity, postmodernism, and poststructuralism all involve a foregrounding of language, a decentering of the world (or recognition of the world's decenteredness), and a celebration of heterogeneity and nonunity, rather than a mourning of the loss of Enlightenment metanarratives and secure foundations.

Anna Yeatman, in *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political*, sees as “arguably the core feature of postmodernism” its “critique of epistemological foundationalism,” which validates knowledge claims “with reference to some *a priori* ground of truth, beauty and justice. This ground is a monocentric universal guaranteed by the unitary subject of mankind, god or nature.”¹⁰ Cornel West (although he does not specifically mention such traditional grounding universals as truth, justice, or God) defines epistemological foundationalism as an attempt “to invoke self-justifying, intrinsically credible, theory-neutral or noninferential elements in experience which provide foundations for other knowledge-claims and serve as the final terminating points for chains of epistemic justification.”¹¹

Put more simply, a “foundation” is an unquestioned ground, a given in a system of thought, belief, or values—a given taken as a good-in-itself. A foundation is what Jacques Derrida calls a “center” in his well-known early essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”: That very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality,” a seemingly originary point of “reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay” it both opens up and closes off. In western metaphysics, such centers have variously been filled by “God,” “consciousness,” “person,” “truth,” or “reason”—all of which have appeared to be “the constant of a presence.”¹²

Derrida’s own work has obviously played a major role in the *decentering*, the deconstruction of such beliefs in centers, presence(s), and foundations. But so has other work critical of the various “centrisms”—androcentrism, Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism—work by feminists, postcolonial critics, critical race theorists, critical whiteness theorists, multiculturalists. Although many thinkers committed to political and social change are troubled by the postmodern rejection of foundations, unified selves, and metanarratives, *others*, including hooks and Kristeva, realize the emancipatory potential of such postmodern moves away from “monocentric universals.”¹³

Kristeva has more often discussed modernity than postmodernity or postmodernism, as is true of many contemporary French intellectuals, yet her frequent critiques of metanarratives and totalizing systems (including Marxism and some feminisms) seem part of the postmodern project. Her model of subjectivity—as split, nonoriginary, other to itself—is also postmodern. In much of her work, Kristeva conceptualizes and embraces “*le sujet en procès*”: the subject in process/on trial. She celebrates aesthetic innovation and transgression of the symbolic order. But she also rejects the idea of a “simply ludic and parodic postmodernity.”¹⁴ For Kristeva, ethics and politics are inevitably linked to each other, to psychoanalysis, and to postmodernism.

hooks does not embrace postmodernism or poststructuralism uncritically, although the strands of it identified with thinkers like Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall run through much of her work, and she often uses concepts and techniques of deconstruction and decentering. In such texts as her 1990 essay “Postmodern Blackness,” hooks has written about postmodern theory,¹⁵ and some of her writing (like some of Kristeva’s) has *been* postmodern. She understands why many critics believe it is no coincidence that postmodern critiques of the subject, voice,

and identity arose just when many previously marginalized people were claiming their own voices and identities. Yet she also suspects that “this sense of threat and the fear it evokes are based on a misunderstanding of the postmodernist political project.”¹⁶ And she, unlike some leftist critics of postmodernism, assumes there can be a “postmodernist political project.”

hooks sees the liberatory possibilities of postmodern theories of subjectivity and postmodern critiques of both gender and racial essentialism. Such essentialism, she argues, produces “notions of static over-determined identity.” hooks suggests that postmodern views of subjectivity can help undermine “narrow, constricting notions of blackness” that lead to problematic “notions of ‘authentic’ black identity.”¹⁷ Monolithic and static notions of whiteness, too, and of other racialized identities need to be deconstructed as well, and postmodern psychoanalytic ideas about the heterogeneity, complexity, and fluidity of identities and subjectivities can be helpful in this deconstruction. hooks describes herself as “always interested in psychoanalytical approaches to understanding the construction of subjectivity,”¹⁸ and she shares Kristeva’s view that subjectivity is always in-process and heterogeneous.¹⁹ hooks’s antiessentialist and intersectional view of gender fits with that of many other contemporary feminists,²⁰ not all of whom embrace psychoanalysis or postmodernism, and her antiessentialist and intersectional views of race fit with much contemporary theorizing about race,²¹ not only that inspired by postmodern theory.

hooks is both engaged in and also critical of postmodern theorizing. Like African American philosopher and theologian Cornel West, with whom she has occasionally collaborated, hooks acknowledges that postmodern theory and theories *about* postmodernist cultural practices rarely address the theoretical and artistic work or the lived experience of black people, and especially black women;²² the neglect of hooks’s own work in most discussions of postmodernism illustrates her point.

For many of its critics, postmodernism has effaced rather than helpfully de-essentialized race, and has erased (or failed to see) artistic and theoretical work by people of color. West wonders whether most current discourse on postmodernism does “highlight notions of difference, marginality and otherness in such a way that it further marginalizes actual people of difference and otherness, e.g., African-Americans, Latinos, women, etc.”²³ Perhaps it is the case that many theorists “re-other” the other in the process of addressing “otherness”—or, more properly, of failing to truly address, to engage in genuine dialogue with the other.

Yet, hooks seems to agree with West that “oppositional black intellectuals must be conversant with, and, to a degree, participants in the debate” over postmodernism,²⁴ given its prominence in contemporary culture and theory, just as she has been a participant in the “theory debates” within feminism.²⁵ Given hooks’s commitments to reaching a wide audience as a writer and speaker advocating radical social and political change, she is understandably critical of the inaccessibility of much postmodern theory—ostensibly concerned with decentering and marginality yet often couched in an elitist language “rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge.” She does hold out hope that postmodernist thinking can become “transformative,” but only if it can break with “the notion of ‘authority’ as ‘mastery over,’”²⁶ and with white supremacist patriarchal thinking, as do her own

interventions into postmodern theory and culture. And her admirable ability, like West's and, recently, Kristeva's, to engage both academic and broader public audiences enlarges the space for genuine dialogues about postmodernism's possibilities and limits, and about the relevance of love to our thinking about race, gender, class, culture, and politics.

Since the early to mid-1990s, more fruitful dialogues about the relations among theory, ethics, politics, and postmodernism have begun to be audible. Susan Stanford Friedman notes the shift beginning in the 1990s toward "a growing legitimacy (once again) for questions of ethics and politics, of agency and action, of intention and meaning." She sees this shift as both a response to critiques by nonpoststructuralists (particularly some feminists and theorists of race and postcoloniality) and to a "shift *within* poststructuralism itself, the result at least in part...of critiques from without." She notes that such terms as *identity*, *agency*, *author*, and "experience"—usually deconstructed if not rejected within poststructuralist discourses—have begun to be "recuperated" and "renegotiated," even by those profoundly influenced by poststructuralism.²⁷ She does not mention *love*, but I think it, too, is now being resuscitated, both as a theoretical concept and as a potential ground for practice.

Yet, what does it mean to think anew—in the light or wake of postmodernism—about love? In her essay "Postmodern Love," Catherine Belsey argues that postmodernism, and deconstruction in particular, has not only been skeptical toward "metaphysics,...presence, transcendence, certainty, and all absolutes," but also has maintained "an incredulity toward true love."²⁸ Perhaps this skepticism about love is similar to what Lyotard calls the postmodern "incredulity toward metanarratives."²⁹ Yet, I find it significant that Belsey's own essay conflates "love" with "true love"—with romantic love and with desire. Her essay thus exemplifies what I see as most postmodernist thinkers' unwillingness or inability, until recently, to conceive of love as *other* than desire. *Desire* has long been on the approved list of postmodern topics, having been legitimated by Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and other "great white fathers" of theory. Perhaps, since Freud, it has been impossible for most theorists to imagine love outside the context of desire. Perhaps it has been the association of love with sentimentality—and the gendering of both (and perhaps of all emotion) as "feminine"—that has led to the relative dearth of contemporary theoretical explorations of love, especially of nonromantic and nonsexual love.³⁰ However, some dimensions of love, I would argue, are not intrinsically related to or reducible to desire and are closer to *agape* than *eros*: respect, friendship,³¹ compassion, self-love, love of not only one's own but others' children, love of one's community.

One of the strongest sources in the West for a foundational view of love as a good-in-itself and as a ground for action has been Christianity, with its roots, of course, in Judaism, which particularly stressed love and respect for God.³² Christian emphases on God's love of humanity and on humans' love of God and of each other go hand in hand—in theory, although not always in practice (as evidenced, for example, by Christian justifications for the Inquisition, imperialism, and slavery). Jewish and Christian beliefs and foundations were among those called into question most thoroughly by postmodernists and poststructuralists, as such beliefs had earlier been critiqued by postmodernists' precursors: Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx.

Until rather recently, there were few postmodern theorists (Mark Taylor being one prominent exception) engaged with religion.³³ Postmodernists' skepticism about the foundational and metaphysical claims of Western religious traditions may explain the widespread lambasting of Julia Kristeva after the appearance of her 1985 book *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. Paul Smith, for example, called "deplorable" Kristeva's shift from her earlier materialist analyses of the sociosymbolic to her later psychoanalytic investigations of faith, maternity, and love. Ann Rosalind Jones criticized Kristeva for focusing on both religion and love because "religion and romantic love have not been alternatives to women's subordination; they have been the ideologies through which that subordination was lived."³⁴ Of course, many revisionist feminist and womanist theologians have made similar arguments about patriarchal religious institutions and dogma, and many feminists, from a variety of perspectives, have critiqued the ideology of romantic love. Kristeva says in *In the Beginning Was Love* and elsewhere that she is not a believer, having rejected faith in adolescence; she has approached both religion and love from her perspective as a psychoanalyst and cultural theorist.

Yet, if Kristeva is not a believer in religion, she has increasingly been a believer in psychoanalysis. In fact, she asserts that psychoanalysis has replaced religion in the (post)modern world, and she analyzes the homologies between religion and psychoanalysis.³⁵ For her, psychoanalysis is the "lay version, the only one, of the speaking being's quest for truth [and love?] that religion symbolizes for certain... contemporaries and friends."³⁶ Perhaps not since Freud has a psychoanalyst devoted so much attention to issues of religious faith.

The relation of African American postmodern thinkers and writers—including hooks—to religion and to Christianity in particular is inevitably more complex than Kristeva's, given the crucial role that faith and the black church have played in the preservation of African American life, sanity, and community since the days of slavery—even though Christianity was also the religion of colonizers and enslavers. In one of her dialogues with West, hooks says she, like West, is a believer in God; West notes that such belief has a "long tradition" in the black community.³⁷ hooks also often discusses her engagement with Buddhism, a nontheocentric form of spirituality and practice.

Although in hooks's work, love is integrally related to faith and spiritual practice, it is also intimately related to politics, as she clearly articulates in her 1994 essay "Love as the Practice of Freedom."³⁸ But hooks is aware that, just as postmodernists have shied away from analyses of love, so have "politically progressive radicals" and others on the left. This silence about love, she believes, "arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns." For hooks, it may *only* be an "ethic of love" (West's phrase in *Race Matters*)³⁹ that can enable those working for radical political change to resist "continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism." Without this ethic of love, we may otherwise only struggle against forms of domination that directly affect our own self-interest.⁴⁰

In her 1996 book *Killing Rage, Ending Racism*, hooks defines "love" as the extension of our concerns beyond ourselves.⁴¹ Love, in this sense, seems to engender

and be engendered by both empathy and compassion. For hooks, the civil rights movement and the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., in particular, were grounded firmly in and gained strength from this love ethic. She notes that “those black and white folks who struggled together for racial justice... were bound by a shared belief in the transformative power of love.” For some, this belief was in turn grounded in “religious conviction.” But even when it was not so grounded, the “understanding that love was the antithesis of the will to dominate and subjugate” was crucial in allowing civil rights activists to “know love, to love one another,” and to become effective allies across differences. This love was politically radicalizing, and, she argues, “not sentimental,”⁴² perhaps because it did not efface alterity as sentimental forms of love do. For her, such a “beloved community” of people with diverse identities and experiences can be formed “not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation.”⁴³ And such beloved communities—united both in love and struggle and able to acknowledge and embrace differences as well as find common ground—have been and can continue to be created in antiracist and feminist movements, too.

hooks’s own choice to analyze and advocate love as ethically and politically *necessary* (if not always *sufficient*) for both self-transformation and social/cultural transformation is apparent in the very titles of many of her recent books, especially her love trilogy: *All About Love: New Visions* (2000); *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001); and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002). Many of her other works also explore love and self-love, including *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993); *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (2003); most of her children’s books, like her influential *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999) and *Home-made Love* (2002); and her recent collection of poems called *When Angels Speak of Love* (2007).⁴⁴

We must be able to love ourselves as well as others who are both like and unlike us, as hooks often argues, in order to survive and in order to effect social and political change, especially in the context of continuing white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy. Malcolm X, hooks argues, although he often engaged in antiwhite rhetoric before his conversion to Islam, had his greatest impact through his insistence on the need for black self-love. This call for self-love, which hooks herself often makes, was as important, finally, to the struggle to end racist domination as King’s call (echoing Jesus) to love our enemies.⁴⁵ hooks says she shares King’s “conviction that it is in choosing love, and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform the society in ways that enhance the collective good.”⁴⁶

hooks virtually reverses the usual association of politics with material needs and religion with spiritual needs; she deconstructs typical Marxist and some feminists’ binary oppositions between the religious and the political, and love can serve as the bridge between them. A frequent critic of white supremacist capitalism and consumerism, hooks is well aware of the need to struggle against material injustices, but she moves beyond a purely materialist critique of social and political injustice. Yet she is doubtful that traditional religious institutions can provide spiritual sustenance or grounds for political action. As hooks argues, “the institutionalization and commercialization of the church has undermined the power of [the] religious

community to transform souls, to intervene collectively.” She claims, instead, that “life-sustaining political communities can provide... space for the renewal of the spirit” if progressives can “address the needs of the spirit in... political theory and practice”⁴⁷—needs most progressives, like postmodernists, have ignored or dismissed. Such a spirit-recognizing, love-based, radical politics has affinities with liberation theology (grounded in Catholicism and Marxism), but with a postmodern skepticism about metanarratives (including Marxism), a feminist critique of patriarchal structures (including Christianity), and a postmodern view of the subjects and objects of love.

For Kristeva, religious faith itself grows out of the experience of love; it is a paternalization of an earlier maternal bond. In an interesting revision of Freud’s views, Kristeva asserts that religious faith is “a primary identification with a loving and protective agency... a continuity or fusion with an other that is no longer substantial and maternal but symbolic and paternal.” Yet, what she calls the *semiotic* (the realm of bodily drives, rhythms), which she associates with the maternal, is “prior to the sign, to meaning, and to the subject,”⁴⁸ and thus seems to transcend (or precede) both masculine and feminine. For her, neither love nor religious faith is reducible to sexual desire, narcissism, transference, or illusion, although both love and faith partake of all of these.

For Kristeva, religious, literary, and psychoanalytic discourse all proceed through metaphor and are “essentially amorous... unstabilizing the same through its identification with the other.”⁴⁹ Poetry, religion, and psychoanalysis are interrelated in that they require dialogue between the semiotic and what she calls the *symbolic* (the realm of language and order) and because they all require love.⁵⁰ Love, in turn, involves a respect for and bridging of alterity—the alterity not only between but also within subjects, since, as Kristeva puts it, we are all “*strangers to ourselves*.”⁵¹

As I argue elsewhere, in Kristeva’s recent work, “both maternity and psychoanalysis serve as prime models or metaphors... for potentially ethical, loving relations to the other—dialogic relations which respect and embrace alterity.”⁵² For Kristeva, “maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics,”⁵³ although she, like hooks, acknowledges that not all mothers are loving or ethical in relation to their children. And although at times Kristeva uses “maternity” or the “maternal” to refer to the bodily experiences of (those) women who become pregnant and give birth, she also frequently uses these terms metaphorically. Kristeva coins the term *herethics* (*hérethique*: heretic, *her*-ethics) in the essay “*Hérethique de l’amour*” (published in translation as “*Stabat Mater*” in her book *Tales of Love*). “Herethics” suggests a new ethical conception in which “the mother” is a metaphor for anyone who deals with the other through love—through a love that doesn’t reduce the other to the same but acknowledges the radical alterity of the other, and of the self.⁵⁴ Herethics, for Kristeva, is “undeath [*a-mort*], love [*amour*].”⁵⁵ For Kristeva, “the subject exists only inasmuch as it identifies with an ideal other who is the speaking other, the other insofar as he [*sic*] speaks.”⁵⁶ It is our relation to the other (real and ideal) that makes us speaking subjects.

Ethics is, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham puts it, “the arena in which the claims of otherness... are articulated and negotiated.”⁵⁷ For Kristeva, love is the ground of

ethical practice, which is, in turn, the ground of political practice. I coined the term *pol  thique* for Kristeva's theory of the inevitable and dialogic relation between ethics and politics.⁵⁸ For Kristeva, love is also the ground of effective psychoanalysis, which she sees as a "micropolitics." Kristeva asserts that "there is no analysis if the Other is not an Other whom I love."⁵⁹ Psychoanalysis not only requires the analyst's ability to love the analysand, but it succeeds only when it enables the analysand to love. For her, both psychoanalysis and faith begin with "transferential love."⁶⁰ This transferential love may be operative in any relationship in which one acknowledges the otherness of the other by acknowledging one's own otherness to oneself. One could just as easily call such an ability *respect*, *empathy*, or *compassion*, terms which, like *love*, hooks often uses.

hooks has long been a believer in the power of love and of dialogue. She notes that one of her major mentors, Paolo Freire "always says that it is dialogue that is the true act of love between two subjects, and points out again and again, drawing on Che Guevara and others, that there can be no revolution without love."⁶¹ She also believes that "education for critical consciousness," as theorized by Freire and written about as well as practiced by hooks and many of us interested in liberatory pedagogy, is necessary to enable us to "begin the practice of loving." A love ethic requires that we learn to love ourselves but also emphasizes service to others, whom we must see as subjects rather than objects. This service, in turn, "strengthens our capacity to know compassion and deepens our insight."⁶²

hooks's view of love is similar to Kristeva's; for both, love involves recognizing and embracing the otherness and the "subjecthood" of the other. Kristeva suggests the simultaneous need for acknowledging that I am that "other's" other, which perhaps can be achieved by acknowledging that I am also other to myself.⁶³ In the words of one of hooks's frequently cited mentors, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, "The relationship between self and nonself is such that the self exists only when the non-self exists.... So all things rely on each other in order to be. My identity meets your identity in order to be possible. Why don't we come together in order to find ways to preserve not only my identity but your identity and that of others too?"⁶⁴

To understand that "otherness" is relational and perspectival enables us to move beyond the often implicit assumption that whiteness (or maleness) is normative, that white men are "selfsame," while men and women of color and white women are other. We need to ask, "Who is whose other—and when, where, how, and why?"

Susan Friedman makes a similar argument for seeing otherness as relational and contextual. She believes that what she calls "relational positionality" began to emerge during the 1980s in feminist theoretical discourse as a "supplement to...the scripts of denial, accusation, and confession" that had dominated much feminist discourse since the late 1960s when issues of race, ethnicity, and racism had been raised—usually by feminists of color.⁶⁵ Friedman believes that a range of theories—including feminist, psychoanalytic, object relations, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and critical race theory—have made it possible for this healing, productive, "relational" view of otherness to develop. These theories share a view of identity "as situationally constructed and defined and at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and

stratification”; they also share a view of subjectivity as “nonunitary, indeterminate, nomadic, and hybrid.”⁶⁶ This postmodern view of subjectivity is shared by Kristeva and hooks, both of whom, like many other (post-) postmodernist thinkers (including postmodern feminists and critical race theorists), reject an essential and monolithic notion of “Woman” and of racial, ethnic, and national identities (e.g., blackness, whiteness, Frenchness).⁶⁷

Understanding identity as itself constructed, relationally and dialogically, and as fluid, in- process, heterogeneous, can, like understanding that we are all “strangers to ourselves,” as Kristeva puts it, help us move beyond racism and sexism, beyond anger and fear, and move *toward* compassion and love.⁶⁸ For hooks, postmodern theories and practices can open up new ways of imagining subjectivity and alterity and the relations between them. As hooks puts it, instead of assuming that political alliances like the feminist movement can only form around “identity-based bonding, we might be drawn together rather by a commonality of feeling.” She argues that “radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition.”⁶⁹

Reimagining subjectivity will not be a *sufficient* condition for eliminating or even diminishing racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of domination, but it seems to me to be a *necessary* condition. Replacing an “assumed unity of human beings” with an awareness of “*an otherness* that...becomes an integral part of the *same*” may help us avoid xenophobia and racism. As Kristeva argues in *Strangers to Ourselves*, “the foreigner is neither a race nor a nation. Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners.” If we can “become reconciled with [our] own otherness-foreignness,” we can also unravel transference and move toward an “ethics of respect”—and perhaps of love—for the other/the foreigner, within and without.⁷⁰

No doubt, we can all imagine ways in which even love, if given a foundational status, could, like reason or truth, lead to horrors committed in its name. And some might argue that love itself requires a *prior* foundation, such as Christianity or liberal humanism. Yet, Cornel West makes an important point in arguing that it is a mistake to collapse “epistemological concerns of justification in philosophy into methodological concerns of explanation in social theory.”⁷¹ I would like to suggest that although one may be unable or unwilling to justify potential foundational claims philosophically, in real life and in social policy we must be able to *act*. I believe there is such a thing as a foundation that is “good enough” (a term D.W. Winnicott uses for mothers and which I am appropriating here):⁷² a belief in love or justice as goods even if their status as goods cannot be philosophically demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Such “good-enough foundations” are similar to what feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler calls “contingent foundations,” which do not serve as “the unquestioned and the unquestionable within any theory,” as traditional foundations (like reason or God) have functioned. Rather than trying to “do away with foundations,” Butler argues, we can posit a foundation as a “contingent and contestable presumption.”

Such “good-enough” or “contingent” foundations may also be similar to what the novelist John Gardner calls “relative absolute values”⁷³ (and which he posits as an alternative to what he sees as postmodern nihilism or amorality). I am appropriating and recontextualizing Gardner’s seemingly oxymoronic term “relative absolutes,” because it seems to capture the tone, tensions, and contradictions of the postmodern condition. Love (empathy, kindness) can perhaps be one of these relative absolutes, one of these contingent foundations—always open to scrutiny and even revision, but able to serve as a ground for action.

West, with whom hooks has often been in literal dialogue, argues in *Race Matters* that a “love ethic” is necessary for what he calls a “politics of conversion,” which can provide hope and agency to oppressed people, and an alternative to rampant hopelessness. For West, “the fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love.”⁷⁴ While hooks has an even more revisionist relationship to Christianity and its attendant foundationalism than West does, her commitment to it and to other spiritual practices (especially Buddhism), as well as her political commitments help provide a ground for her belief in love as a good. But even non-Christian postmodernists can find—and do need—“good enough” foundations, good enough grounds for action. Such foundations or grounds can be found in such perhaps contingent and only relatively (rather than absolutely) good values and practices as respect, care, and love.

While Lyotard analyzes postmodernity’s crises of (epistemological) *legitimation*, Kristeva, like West, refers to its “crises of *love*” (my emphasis).⁷⁵ Kristeva grounds her call to love in what I consider at least a quasi-foundational discourse, psychoanalysis, which takes the unconscious (and in her case, the semiotic and the symbolic) as foundational, as given. Yet, Kristeva incorporates, revises, and moves outside of Freud’s and Lacan’s founding work in psychoanalysis.

The postmodern feminist work of Kristeva and hooks, and especially their theories of the role of love in ethics and politics, has much to contribute to expanding dialogues about ethics, as well as to our thinking about race, gender, subjectivity, and agency. They both have much to contribute to the development of new directions in postmodern theories and practices, as well. In the very heterogeneity and intertextuality of the discourses shaping hooks’s and Kristeva’s view of and belief in love—feminism, poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory and practice, critical race and postcolonial theory, Christianity, Buddhism, Marxism, experiences of diaspora, hybridity, and exile—they are both postmodern. Kristeva and hooks explicitly posit a decentered, heterogeneous, nonunified postmodern subject as the subject and object of love. In viewing love as both ethical and political, they perform a blurring of borders and boundaries—as do both postmodernism and the dynamism of love itself.

Perhaps love is reemerging in some contemporary theoretical discourses as a response to needs many of us are only now acknowledging, needs for affirmation and for hope in an intellectual climate of critique, skepticism, cynicism, and, at times, despair. But it may also be emerging as a response to fuller recognition of the role of ethics and affect in addressing complex social problems such as racism—problems that are structural and institutional, but also, as West argues, a matter of values, at-

titudes, and affect.⁷⁶ As hooks asserts, “all the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic,” and “the transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change.”⁷⁷ Both hooks and Kristeva see love as crucial for creating political alliances as well as life-affirming identities and human communities. For bell hooks and Julia Kristeva—and perhaps for many of us—love may be the postmodern shape of hope.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Michelle Burnham, Jeanne Gunner, Juliana Chang, Bridget Cooks, and Eileen Razzari Elrod for their valuable feedback on a draft of this essay and thank my student assistant Julianne Jigour for her help with the manuscript. And, of course, I would like to thank bell hooks, whose work I have found a constant source of challenge, inspiration, and illumination.
2. Lyotard, while acknowledging he is “simplifying to the extreme,” defines the “*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives,” especially such Enlightenment “grand stories” or metanarratives as the belief in progress through universal reason. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
3. Susan Stanford Friedman also uses the term *post/poststructuralist* for recent theorists both influenced by and engaged in reshaping poststructuralism and postmodernism; Friedman, “Post/Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism: The Politics of Recuperation and Negotiation,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 465–90.
4. Kristeva was raised in then-Communist Bulgaria before moving to Paris as a young woman to study with Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss; she has spent much of her life since in Paris, although she also travels internationally. hooks was raised in rural Kentucky before moving to the San Francisco Bay area for college at Stanford—where she began her first book, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) and she has taught at a number of universities around the United States since then, including a recent stint at Berea College in her home state of Kentucky.
5. Of course, hooks's theoretical writing is much more accessible than most of Kristeva's is. hooks writes that while Kristeva's work may be “linguistically convoluted,” and should be read with its specific social and historical context clearly in mind, it also “enriches our understanding of gender politics”; bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, South End Press, 1989), 40.
6. For her own views of feminism, see, e.g., Julia Kristeva, “Women's Time,” trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 187–213. For feminist critiques of Kristeva, which often focus on her supposed essentialism, see, e.g., Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Butler and Grosz also critique Kristeva's heterosexism. For more sympathetic feminist analyses that consider Kristeva's work as feminist or as useful for feminism, see, e.g., Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985); Marilyn Edelstein, “Metaphor, Meta-Narrative, and Mater-Narrative in Kristeva's ‘Stabat Mater,’” in *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis*, ed. David Crownfield (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Jacqueline Rose, “Julia Kristeva—Take Two,” in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), 141–64; and Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993).
7. Kristeva, “Women's Time,” 196.
8. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) does not even mention Kristeva (or Irigaray, who has also explored postmodern ethics, or any other feminist work in ethics). Even now, unless it is explicitly feminist, much work on postmodern literature, art, philosophy, and theory ignores feminist contributions to these areas, especially by feminists

of color. And what is usually called “feminist ethics” rarely engages with postmodern theory (feminist or not). For example, none of the essays in *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992) mention Kristeva; its 11-page bibliography of work in feminist ethics does not list any of Kristeva’s or hooks’s work either. Only one essay in a more recent collection, *Feminists Doing Ethics*, ed. Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) mentions hooks (twice) but does not really discuss her work (and none of the essays mentions Kristeva). See, however, Dawne McCance, “*L’écriture limite*: Kristeva’s Postmodern Feminist Ethics,” *Hypatia* 11 (Spring 1996): 141–60; and Marilyn Edelstein, “Toward a Feminist Postmodern *Poléthique*: Kristeva on Ethics and Politics,” in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 196–214. For a discussion of hooks’s work in relation to ethics, see Angharad N. Valdivia, “bell hooks: Ethics from the Margins,” *Qualitative Inquiry* (2002): 429–47.

9. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
10. Anna Yeatman, *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 28, 13.
11. Cornel West, “Afterword: The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism,” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. by John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 261.
12. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 248, 249.
13. Yeatman, *Postmodern Revisionings*, 13.
14. Suzanne Clark and Kathleen Hulley, “An Interview with Julia Kristeva: Cultural Strangeness and the Subject in Crisis,” *Discourse* 13 (1990–91): 177.
15. bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” in her *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 23–31.
16. hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 28.
17. *Ibid.*
18. hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 183.
19. Although hooks says that “African-American subjectivity is always in process” (*Killing Rage*, 250), I think she views all subjectivity as similarly fluid and dynamic.
20. Kelly Oliver makes a point other feminists have also made, that many feminists of color—including hooks—had critiqued the gender essentialism of much of the early second-wave U.S. feminist movement, in which white middle-class women often took their own experiences as normative or universal, thus marginalizing women of color; *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 168.
21. See, for example, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994); Joseph L. Graves, Jr. *The Race Myth: Why We Pretend Race Exists in America* (New York: Dutton, 2004).
22. hooks, *Yearning*, 24.
23. Cornel West, “Black Culture and Postmodernism,” in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (New York: New Press, 1998), 92.
24. West, “Black Culture,” 92.
25. See Marilyn Edelstein, “Resisting Postmodernism or ‘A Postmodernism of Resistance’”: bell hooks and the Theory Debates,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women Color*, ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 86–118.
26. hooks, *Yearning*, 25.
27. Friedman, “Post/Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism,” 465, 466, 472–73.
28. Catherine Belsey, “Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 683.
29. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.
30. I thank Juliana Chang, Michelle Burnham, and Bridget Cooks for discussing this point with me.
31. Although see hooks on “romantic friendships” *Communism*, 206–17.
32. And both Christianity and Judaism are indebted in many ways to classical views of love. Kristeva suggests that the Old Testament’s imperative to love God with all one’s soul and to love one’s

- neighbor as oneself produced “a true revolution...doubtless dependent on the waning Hellenistic world, but above all on a new, unprecedented, scandalous, insane attitude, which transformed Greek *Eros* and biblical *Ahav* into *Agape*—Christian love.” She contrasts the Old Testament’s view of love as “ordered love, deserved love,” with the view, “as early as the Gospels” that “Christian love is definitely a *disinterested gift*,” a “theocentric love, as opposed to human deserved love [or] eros aiming at happiness”; Julia Kristeva, “God Is Love,” in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 139.
33. Although poststructuralism was having a profound impact on literary studies by the late 1960s, the field of religious studies would, not surprisingly (given the antitheological, postmetaphysical assumptions of poststructuralism) be affected significantly later. Probably the first American work in the field of religious studies to engage seriously with poststructuralism/postmodernism was Mark Taylor’s *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). In recent years, there has been increasing interest among feminist theologians in postmodernist thought and in French feminists like Kristeva and Irigaray in particular.
 34. Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Paul Smith, “Julia Kristeva et al.; or, Take Three or More,” in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 98; Ann Rosalind Jones, “Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics,” *Feminist Review* (November 1984): 70.
 35. Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love*.
 36. Kristeva, “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” trans. Athena Viscusi, in *The Female Autograph*, ed. Domna C. Stanton, *New York Literary Forum* 12–13 (1984): 267.
 37. Yet West acknowledges that Christianity has not “had a monopoly on hope in the Black community because there are secular forms [and] other religious forms” that can be revitalized to help combat rampant hopelessness; bell hooks and Cornel West, “Black Women and Men: Partners in the 1990s,” in bell hooks, *Yearning*, 204.
 38. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 243–50.
 39. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
 40. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 243–44.
 41. hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).
 42. *Ibid.*, 265. hooks contrasts the civil rights movement, grounded in love, with the black power movement in the 1960s, which, she argues, was more concerned with power and “equated love with weakness”; hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 245. Many of the men (and the major figures *were* men) involved in the black power and Black Arts movements were incapable of transcending self-interest even to be able to recognize the needs and rights of black women, she argues.
 43. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 265.
 44. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: HarperCollins 2001); hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); hooks, *Happy to Be Nappy* (New York: Hyperion, 1999); hooks, *Homemade Love* (New York: Hyperion, 2002); and hooks, *When Angels Speak of Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).
 45. Cf. the oft-cited passage in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which Baby Suggs preaches in the clearing to a crowd of rapt former slaves: “Here...we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they [whites] do not love your flesh. They despise it.” Baby Suggs exhorts her listeners to “love your heart. For this is the prize”; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 88–89.
 46. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 247.
 47. *Ibid.*, 247–48.
 48. Kristeva, *In the Beginning*, 5.
 49. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 279.
 50. Kristeva replaces Lacan’s scheme of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic with a two-part

- scheme of the semiotic and the symbolic. Her concept of the symbolic is very close to Lacan's; her distinctive contribution to rethinking poststructuralist psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective is the notion of the semiotic, which exists before sexual difference. See Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*; Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*; and Edelstein, "Metaphor" on Kristeva's conception of the semiotic.
51. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
52. Edelstein, "Toward a Feminist Postmodern *Pol  thique*," 200–201.
53. Julia Kristeva, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," trans. Sean Hand, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 297.
54. Edelstein, "Metaphor," 34.
55. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Den  l, 1983), 225–47; and Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 263.
56. Kristeva's view of the otherness of the self, of internal alterity is clearly influenced by Lacan and Freud, but also by Bakhtin. For Bakhtin's influence on Kristeva, see Edelstein, "Metaphor," and also Clark and Hulley, "An Interview with Julia Kristeva."
57. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Ethics" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 394.
58. Edelstein, "Toward a Feminist Postmodern *Polethique*."
59. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 14.
60. Kristeva, *In the Beginning*, 52.
61. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press), 2–3.
62. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 248, 249.
63. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*.
64. Daniel Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist/Christian Awareness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).
65. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse," *Signs* 21 (1995): 1–49.
66. Friedman, "Beyond White and Other," 16–17.
67. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 181–82.
68. While hooks explicitly critiques racial essentialism (e.g., in "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning*, 27), Kristeva's analyses of xenophobia, nationalism, and racism (especially in *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations without Nationalism*) suggest that she also refuses such racial or ethnic essentialism. Her work on French attitudes toward "foreigners"—e.g., immigrants from northern Africa—seems especially relevant now to the heated and highly racialized debates in the U.S. about immigration, especially from Mexico.
69. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 217. As Ewa Plonowska Ziarek argues in her perceptive analysis of hooks's importance for rethinking ethics, politics, and the relations between them, "hooks elaborates an ethics that negotiates between commitments that are often thought to be mutually exclusive: between the ethos of freedom and the obligations to others, between the respect for difference and the creation of democratic community," "Postmodern Blackness/Visionary Feminism: Paradigms of Subjectivity, Community, and Ethics in bell hooks's Work," in her *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 197.
70. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 181–82.
71. West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), xxii.
72. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971). I also discuss the question of "good enough foundations" in Marilyn Edelstein, "Ethics and Contemporary American Literature: Revisiting the Controversy over John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 31 (1996): 40–53.
73. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–21; John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 133.
74. West, *Race Matters*, 63.

75. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 7.
76. West, *Race Matters*, 12–13.
77. hooks, *All About Love*, 98; hooks, *Salvation*, 17. hooks goes so far as to claim that “if all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction”; *All About Love*, 98.

13

“Revolutionary Interdependence”

bell hooks's Ethic of Love as a Basis For a Feminist Liberation Theology of the Neighbor

NANCY E. NIENHUIS

Identifying liberation from any form of domination and oppression as essentially a spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation.¹

From her earliest work bell hooks has argued that ultimately the only way to overcome “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is to build carefully coalitions across the chasms that divide us from each other.² Only by doing so can we truly begin to transform society so that all of its members are treated with justice and respect. Such a task is fraught with pitfalls, however, not the least of which is that from the outset a myriad of systemic factors collude to prevent us from recognizing the “other” across boundaries of difference such as race, class, and gender. The feminist systematic analysis hooks has developed over the decades of her writing creates a path across that borderland. By engaging in an assessment of the current state in which we find ourselves, and by carefully analyzing how we got here and how we remain stuck, hooks lays the groundwork for a different way of being, for a revolutionary interdependence that is profoundly spiritual and has the potential to change us from the inside out, and thus to transform the world.³ Moreover, her work provides a powerful basis for feminist liberation theologies.

For hooks contemporary life is marked by supreme alienation, as evidenced in the despair, hopelessness, and self-loathing seen in so many African American communities. The “culture of domination” in which we live, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, reinforces itself by colonizing our understanding of ourselves:⁴ “The tremendous message in this culture is one of devaluation. Low self-esteem is a national epidemic and victimization is the flip side of domination.”⁵ Because of how oppression functions, people respond to such dehumanization by attacking each other rather than the overall system.

While her focus remains on black communities, hooks’s analysis pertains to modern life generally. We live in silos of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and more. The borders between our communities, whether gated or not, create a line that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is designed to reinforce. The stronger these borders, the less likely it is that we have any sense of what each other’s lives are

like, making it all but impossible for us to work together effectively. This supreme alienation fosters fear, distrust, and even hatred of the other. By making us suspicious of each other, systems of power and oppression undermine solidarity, which of course is a direct benefit to those who are privileged and elite. Since her earliest work, hooks has argued that this culture of domination is “the foundation on which sexist ideology and other ideologies of group oppression are based; they can be eliminated only when this foundation is eliminated.”⁶ And the only way to fight this culture is to understand how individual experiences of oppression are connected.⁷ Until this happens we will continue to fight each other instead of the real source of our pain.

In hooks’s analysis, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy flourishes when we are disengaged from each other. To be engaged means to recognize others, to acknowledge their social location or position in some way. In this way a possible moment of, at least, empathy and, at best, critical solidarity can be provided.⁸ This is the revolutionary interdependence hooks mandates. And it is theory that is critical for revolutionary interdependence. As Cornel West explains: “Theory is inescapable because it is an indispensable weapon in struggle, and it is an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides certain kinds of understanding, certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively.”⁹ In other words, theories help to explain how the world works. They act as a key or decoder with which we can make sense of what we see.

To understand systems of power more effectively, it is useful to see society as a series of overlapping strata on a pyramid. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes patriarchy as a “pyramid of multiplicative oppressions” in an attempt to underscore that one can never understand how power functions without understanding that all systems of power inform and affect each other in a constant, ever-changing dance of dominance.¹⁰ To make this idea explicit, Schüssler Fiorenza sketches the classical form of the power structure in ancient Greek society.¹¹ Her pyramid model, somewhat modified, is useful for understanding how contemporary powers function ideologically. If we envision what a pyramid of contemporary U.S. society might look like, we see that people who are considered most powerful constitute the top, and those with the least power make up the bottom. Scanning from top to bottom, one encounters people with ever less power and privilege. Thus, those at the very top are likely to be married, male, white, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, and Christian. We might find single, disabled, immigrant, minority, and poor women and children at the bottom of this pyramid. One’s position on the pyramid is always affected by a variety of interlocking power systems: one’s race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and other characteristics all affect how much power one has.

Power functions on this power pyramid, in part, by making it easy for a person to “look up” to those in higher strata but very difficult to “see” (and thus to understand) those positioned in lower strata. Therefore, as a white woman, I can easily see those above me on the pyramid; in fact, I do so for survival’s sake, because they have power to affect my life. I am less likely to see or understand the lives of those below me—and, quite frankly, usually I don’t have to. They can’t hurt me, in that they do not have power to affect my life as substantially as do those above me.

Moreover, what counts as credible knowledge reflects the view from the top. Those at the top of the pyramid have the voices that are most authoritative and true. They are those whose experiences define reality, or at least determine what is normative, for everyone else. They have the power to create “epistemic authority,” a way of knowing or defining the world that determines what counts as knowledge for everyone else.¹²

An example might be helpful here. During World War I the army needed to screen vast numbers of new recruits for various positions. They asked a group of psychologists, including Lewis Terman of Stanford, to develop intelligence tests for the new recruits. The tests were based on knowledge that white, middle- to upper-class elite college males were thought to have. When the rank and file of the army was given this intelligence test, over 75 percent of those who were new immigrants scored as “feeble-minded.”¹³ Surely, these enlisted men were not in fact feeble-minded, but the applied norm, based as it was on knowledge particular to a specific class and culture, made those outside of the norm appear so. The example illustrates both how norms are based on elites’ experience and how they are inadequate when generalized to other people.

Because it is generally from a position of power that social norms and values are generated, most of us cannot come close to resembling the model that these norms suggest.¹⁴ The further I am from the top of the power pyramid, the less I resemble that norm, the harder it is for my voice to be heard, and the less likely it is that those on the top have any idea of my daily experiences. As hooks explains, “Patriarchy, like any system of domination (for example racism), relies on socializing everyone to believe that in all human relations there is an inferior and a superior party, one person is strong, the other weak, and that it is therefore natural for the powerful to rule over the powerless.”¹⁵

This pyramid of interconnecting powers is intricately tied to how we understand the world and our rightful place in it. It is buttressed with ideologies and archetypes that are created by and further reinforce dominant power systems, that portray us to each other in representative and stereotypical ways, and that seduce us into colluding with them.

In addition, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy fosters myths that seem to explain why some people are privileged and some are not, all the while insuring that the focus is not on the dominant and elite. One of the most effective myths is that of the American dream, according to which this country is one of endless opportunity where anyone can “make it” if he or she tries hard enough. This is known as the Horatio Alger myth. Such myths mask the ways that systems of oppression prevent us from recognizing the realities of each other’s lives. In fact, hooks argues that the more we believe that the current system works for the benefit of all, the easier it is to scapegoat marginalized populations for their circumstances.¹⁶ Belief in American dream mythology tells us that anyone who isn’t successful by contemporary standards (read wealthy) is morally suspect and most likely responsible for his or her own circumstances. Systems of power such as racism and classism disappear from view and thus escape critique.

Solidarity under such circumstances is difficult to attain. As hooks points out,

“To maintain this commitment to solidarity we must be ever vigilant, living as we do in a society where internalized racism and sexism make it a norm for us to treat one another with disrespect.”¹⁷ Solidarity requires that we understand how we both benefit from and are hurt by systems of power, and that systems of power shift, impacting us one way in one situation and another way in another. hooks provides numerous examples of this phenomenon throughout her work. In *Feminist Theory* she takes to task “privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin.”¹⁸ Elsewhere she points out that black men have to acknowledge “that sexism empowers them despite the impact of racism in their lives.”¹⁹ What’s more, power systems encourage both blacks and whites to focus on race rather than class. For blacks in particular, recognizing class differences destabilizes the idea that racism affects all blacks equally.²⁰ Yet unless we focus on all forms of oppression simultaneously, we cannot build true coalitions for change.²¹ Either we all work together for a transformed world or none of us will get there.

In our work together for change, hooks argues, knowing each other across boundaries of difference keeps our theories honest. Dominant systems of power lie to us about who the other is and what that person is like. Stereotypes aid this process. When people are separated from each other, hooks warns, there is danger that their theory will be co-opted by dominant interests: “If there is not mutual exchange between the cultural subjects...that are written about and the critics who write about them, a politic of domination is easily reproduced wherein intellectual elites assume an old colonizing role, that of privileged interpreter—a cultural overseer.”²² However, intellectual work can have the opposite effect if done well: “[W]hen we do insurgent intellectual work that speaks to a diverse audience, to masses of people with different class, race, or educational backgrounds, we become part of communities of resistance, coalitions that are not conventional.”²³

For hooks the goal of theoretical work must be to seek the highest good for all, and it is from this conviction that her call for revolutionary interdependence emerges. hooks argues that until we see how colluding with some systems while resisting others will never enable us to work together effectively, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy will win: “Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.”²⁴ Too often for those of us with privilege, border crossing is something we merely dip our toes into before retreating into the safety and comfort of our privileged existence. Genuine solidarity recognizes that only interdependence can sustain life on the planet.

The only way to ensure that our actions foster true solidarity is to return to the love ethic that hooks claims was prevalent in earlier liberation movements: “Unless love is the force undergirding our efforts to transform society, we lose our way.”²⁵ hooks has spent time explaining this love ethic and its transformative potential in great detail throughout her work for many years: “Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth.... The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change.... Love is

the heart of the matter. When all else has fallen away, love sustains.”²⁶ This love is not the stuff of romance books and soap operas. It is not sentimental emotion. As Cornel West explains, “Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community.”²⁷ For hooks, this love ethic is what made earlier movements like that for civil rights so powerful and effective.

A love ethic requires work on behalf of others. It facilitates a “renewal of spirit” and leads to our “living in community,” meaning that others are with us in the struggle for change.²⁸ This love ethic is a way to insure that our motives are pure: “Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed.”²⁹ This is in part because liberation movements often have self-interest at their base, a yearning for the suffering of a specific group—women, blacks, gays and lesbians, for example—to end. Liberation movements aren’t usually about a level of social transformation that positively impacts groups outside their own, and that’s where they’re vulnerable. An ethic of love commits us to social transformation where injustice against *any* particular group is intolerable.³⁰

Such love has the potential to undermine how white supremacist capitalist patriarchy functions, because love facilitates recognition of the other, the very thing dominant systems of power are designed to prevent. Recognition, hooks argues, “allows a certain kind of negotiation that seems to disrupt the possibility of domination.”³¹

This love ethic is also “essentially spiritual work.” For hooks, showing solidarity with the poor has always been a way to “dismantle hierarchy and difference.”³² By fostering recognition across boundaries of difference, love enables us to understand that we are all connected, to realize that there is something beyond our being that unites us. For hooks there is a “transcendent reality” that enables us to understand that as we struggle for justice we are all always more than our race, class, sexual orientation, and so forth.³³ Moreover, love, by definition, requires relinquishing aspirations of domination and power. It requires a different set of values, and it requires courage. hooks refers to a passage in the Christian scriptures that reads, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). For hooks, cultures of domination thrive on fear; they cultivate it, they promote “a desire for separation, the desire not to be known” in order to remain safe. Therefore, “When we choose love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other.”³⁴ Thus, “All awakening to love is spiritual awakening.”³⁵

For hooks, the further liberation movements have moved away from an understanding of the spiritual component of their work, the less transformative they have become. She argues that radical movements often separate themselves from religion; it happened both with feminism and with black liberation.³⁶ As these movements became more separated from their religious roots, their discussions of love decreased: “The more freedom became synonymous with gaining equal rights within the existing social structure, the less love was a part of the equation.” Instead the focus became access to economic privilege as “the sole measure of

freedom."³⁷ The result, hooks argues, is that those movements which claimed to be the most radical were in fact the least so, because they were fighting for a piece of the contemporary structure.³⁸

In the present, the "me-me" mentality fostered by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy teaches that worth is measured by possessions, and that peace and happiness come through individualism and a focus on our self-centered needs. A new religion has displaced the old, where advertising is our gospel, malls and desert spas are our temples and churches, greed is our credo, and the path to salvation is lined with credit cards.

However, by committing ourselves to the spiritual work of a love ethic, we have the potential to turn back the tide of these deadly developments. Such a spiritual life has at its heart a way of living that "honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness."³⁹ For hooks, it was in the interconnectedness of Buddhist spirituality that she herself found "a spiritual foundation to sustain my soul."⁴⁰ Specifically, she found that "My belief that God is love—that love is everything, our true destiny—sustains me."⁴¹ Committing to a spiritual life, then, means acknowledging that love is our destiny, and committing to an ethic of love is engaging in spiritual practice: "Spirituality and spiritual life give us the strength to love."⁴²

A return to a love ethic, then, has transformative potential in individuals who follow its spiritual practice, in the communities that are formed as a result, and in the larger society: "Making the choice to love can heal our wounded spirits and our body politic. It is the deepest revolution, the turning away from the world as we know it, toward the world we must make if we are to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation."⁴³ We would despair, according to hooks, if not for the examples in religious traditions where love was the focus. Certainly Martin Luther King, Jr., who hooks believed held the love ethic as central to his work, derived his vision for a movement for liberation from this source. For him love was the "...force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief...is summed up in...'Let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loveth is both of God and knoweth God.'"⁴⁴

This is hooks's theoretical circle—a love ethic grows out of an understanding of God/ultimate reality and causes us to recognize our interconnectedness with our neighbors across boundaries of difference, leading to solidarity in our work toward social transformation, which ultimately reflects the love ethic and the God that infuses it. Yet, as hooks argues, we must be wary of religions, because their teachings and practices have also served as the handmaiden to white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. She refers to her own youth as an example of this, explaining why she and her brother were treated differently: "Both our parents believed in patriarchy; they had been taught patriarchal thinking through religion. At church they learned that God created men to rule the world and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man."⁴⁵ Her parents' Christian beliefs shored up dominant systems of power.

hooks also argues that religion can be detrimental to one's interior life. In particular, Christianity has an uncertain impact when it comes to self-love and self-empowerment: it can both facilitate self-esteem and endanger it. The latter is particularly true in Christianity's emphasis (usually toward women) on obedience and self-sacrifice.⁴⁶ Such teachings require obedience without conscience, an obedience that attacks one's soul. And since self-love is essential to love of others, for hooks an attack on self-esteem is paramount to militating against the very foundation of resistance and struggle.

Other oppressive religious beliefs—those that blame poor people for their poverty, that define the impoverished as morally suspect, and that extol wealth as an indication of divine blessing—are equally problematic. Such beliefs relieve those who are privileged from any perceived moral obligation to respond with compassion to those who are not.⁴⁷

This sort of destructive theology is often defended as “God-ordained” or as “God’s revealed will,” and is deemed “natural” or “common sense.” Those at the top of the power pyramid may use religious texts and interpretations to rationalize and reinforce their “right” to power and privilege. Religion has often played a powerful role in how differences between people are evaluated morally. In much of Christian history, the autonomous, moral person—the person seen as innately capable of theological and ethical competence—was generally a European man of the upper class. Those outside this norm were viewed as morally inferior and thus dependent upon such particular men to convey God’s will for them. Examples are numerous of how ill treatment followed such moral devaluation, including colonialists’ treatment of “native” peoples, the enslavement of millions in the early United States, and the treatment of poor minority women and children now. In each case, the designation of “different” or “other” has often meant “inferior,” bringing life-threatening moral ramifications. When ideology is dressed up as God, it becomes particularly cunning and evil. It masks structural evils such as imperialism, racism, and sexism while remaining their essential servant.

Liberation theologies grew out of this environment, emerging in the mid-twentieth century. People who were on the margins, against whom traditional biblical interpretations were often used, began to take theological interpretation into their own hands. Beginning in South and Central America, often among priests who were serving impoverished communities, theology from the underside arose.⁴⁸ It brought a searing critique of those who used Christianity to shore up the wealthy and privileged, arguing that God was on the side of those most marginalized in society. hooks acknowledges that liberation theology emphasizes love of neighbor and solidarity with those who are poor: “All around the world liberation theology offers the exploited and oppressed a vision of spiritual freedom that is linked to ending domination.”⁴⁹ For hooks, liberation theology moves people across boundaries of difference into radical solidarity, into the kind of revolutionary interdependence that can change the world. Thus, by stressing identification with those who are poor and marginalized, liberation theology acts in radical opposition to religious beliefs that facilitate white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.⁵⁰

Liberation theologies from theological communities in Africa, East Asia, and

elsewhere followed in the 1960s and 1970s, and they were spurred on by the open environment created by Vatican II (1962–65). At the same time, female theologians in the United States took issue with the sexism prominent among liberal Christian theology and within Catholicism and various Protestant denominations. They leveled a critique at traditional interpretations of scripture and theology, arguing that those traditions too shored up power systems that mainly privileged men.⁵¹

Critical feminist liberation theologies are important because they expose how theology may be used to reinforce dominant systems of power such as race, gender, class, and colonialism as “God-ordained” rather than humanly constructed orders.⁵² Critical feminist liberation theologies demonstrate that, too often, nonreligious policy and life cannot be separated from religious understandings and practices, and that what is defined as “religious” or “moral” is often a cover for dominant power interests. Critical feminist liberation theologies recognize that theology, like history, is developed and interpreted in support of “winners,” those who emerge from struggles with their power and privilege intact.

Sharing hooks’s understanding that spirituality is related to a broader goal of social transformation, critical feminist liberation theologians are committed to social and political change. Religion has both social and political effects, ever more so as religious traditions become engaged in public policy debates. It is thus critical that feminist liberation theologians join forces with feminist theorists in debates about public policy, and that they utilize a multiplicative justice framework such as hooks’s. If feminists back away from analyses of religion in the public sphere, they effectively leave critical definitions of family, poverty, values, motherhood, and more in the hands of antifeminist groups. These most conservative of religious voices often advocate positions out of step with the majority of people who call themselves Christian, positions which are often detrimental to people on the bottom of the pyramid.⁵³

hooks has received criticism for framing the struggle for radical transformation in terms of a love ethic deeply grounded in spirituality. hooks writes, “Among progressive thinkers and scholars it was much more hip, cool, and acceptable to express atheistic sentiments than to declare passionate devotion to divine spirit.”⁵⁴ Many feminist liberation theologians have endured similar suspicion or dismissal for engaging spirituality and religion as part of their theoretical work. Yet hooks’s analysis amply demonstrates that without such grounding, without a return to the spirituality and belief that helped make earlier movements successful, there is no hope of success.

Critical feminist liberation theologies provide liberation movements with a sustainable source of moral authority and reflection. Patricia Hill Collins points out that, “Although secular, pragmatic concerns clearly matter, in the absence of deep caring infused with ethical or moral authority, freedom struggles become increasingly difficult to sustain.”⁵⁵ For this reason, critical feminist liberation theologies may prevent women who value their spiritual and religious beliefs from believing they have to abandon these beliefs in pursuit of feminist work (or, more likely, to abandon feminism because they perceive it as hostile to religion). Religious traditions offer many women a rich source of hope and power, and for many Latinas

and African American women in particular, religious beliefs have long sustained them in the face of deep race and class bias.⁵⁶

Feminism grounded in religion has been a part of the women's movement from the very beginning, in part because feminists have always found their pursuit of liberty restrained by their opponents' religious ideas and definitions of proper moral action.⁵⁷ Many religious feminists find that our deepest motivation for fighting injustice arises from a belief that God intends for the world to be different than it is, a belief that we are meant to be cocreators with God of a new and just creation. This is what makes hooks's emphasis on a love ethic so powerful for feminist liberation theology. She argues that the transformation of society is possible only as a spiritual practice, one wherein the practitioner is committed to the creation of a just world that mandates a spirituality of love of other. In other words, hooks's theoretical work undergirds what I think of as a critical feminist liberation theology of the neighbor.

The ethical mandate to love one's neighbor is present in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Perhaps the best-known source is the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, a story of a man beaten by robbers and left to die. As Jesus tells the story in the Gospel of Luke (10:30–35), various members of other religious groups pass by the wounded man until one, moved with compassion—the Samaritan—crosses over to where the man lies and helps him. Just so, ethical engagement requires a moving across the boundary of my own life into the world of another, a movement that takes me from the comfortable borders of my own world and puts me face to face with the needs of another.

A critical feminist liberation theology of the neighbor makes two primary contributions to movements for social transformation. It reassesses what it means to be held accountable to a particular community, and it requires that the "neighborhood" to which one is ethically responsible include one's own home.

First, a feminist liberation theology of the neighbor redefines communities of accountability. Almost since its inception, feminist theology, and later feminist liberation and other theologies, has been concerned about "communities of accountability." These communities provided both moral support and a moral mandate for the theologian and her work. In the earliest version of this notion, other women served as feminist theologians' community of accountability, although they were not named as such.⁵⁸ Theologians such as Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Mary Daly argued that their task was making up for the fact that theology done by men ignored women's experiences and thus was both inaccurate, often in very fundamental and harmful ways, and insufficient. It soon became apparent, however, due to the critique raised within and outside of white feminist theological circles by Delores Williams, Jacqueline Grant, Sheila Greeve Devaney, and others, that there was no such thing as a unified "women's experience," and that the women to whom many early theologians were accountable were white women.⁵⁹ In other words, most early feminist theologians limited their critique to sexism.⁶⁰

When Womanist, Asian American, and Mujerista theologians began to enter the debates, they underscored that the communities to whom they were account-

able were other women like themselves; that is, other African American women, other Asian American women, and other Latinas.⁶¹ Theologians such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Cheryl Sanders brought powerful race and class critiques to earlier theologians' work. This development within feminist liberation theology was further complexified when theologians in other countries joined their voices to the conversation; communities of accountability were further narrowed, becoming Korean women, African women, and so forth.⁶² Kwok Pui-Lan, Chung Hyun Kyung, and Musimbi Kanyoro added critiques of colonialism and Western imperialism to theological analyses, with important results. All of these developments have increasingly revealed the various ways in which theology is a system of power that frequently reinforces dominant ideologies if left unchecked. Feminist liberation theologies in all of their diversity provide a powerful corrective to this reality.

As various nonwhite feminist liberation theologians have developed theology from within and for their specific communities, white theologians have struggled to keep up or have excused themselves from the effort through disclaimers that, since they are white, they will be focusing their attention specifically on white women. This action, while safer than attempting to employ others' thorough analysis or seemingly speaking for other communities, is fraught with limitations. As hooks has pointed out so often in her work, monolithic methods of analysis provide opportunities for the systems of power that remain uninvestigated to impact the outcome of the work in question. In the same way, only a multiplicative theoretical analysis enables the theologian to adequately consider all of those around her as neighbors to whom she is accountable. Thus, those feminist theologies, like feminist theories, that focus on gender to the exclusion of race or class or other powers of injustice will never be as effective as those that attempt to hold all in view at once. Elizabeth Spelman's sage words that the phrase “as a woman” is the Trojan Horse of feminist ethnocentrism” ring true here.⁶³ Any time one narrows one's voice to a single community, one is in danger of work that acts in this Trojanic way. It becomes a stealth theology, because it comes into conversation carrying unseen dominant ideologies.

The same danger threatens more diverse groups. When Chung Hyun Kyung wrote *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, a feminist liberation theology for Korean women, she delivered an important critique of Western, white feminist theology. But she wrote as though Korean women were a fairly monolithic group of people. She knew that wasn't the case, but by writing for “Korean women,” Hyun Kyung made the same mistake early white feminist theologians made: she wrote as though from a unified perspective, with the result that differences between women within that community disappeared. There was no room in her writing for lesbian Korean women, for example. Other issues of class or religious bias were also inadequately addressed. Hyun Kyung explained that she believed that such a monolithic step, while it had drawbacks, was necessary when a theological analysis was young, so that it could present a united front, and that later on it could be nuanced to reflect these other voices.⁶⁴ But that argument rings hollow to those who finally see their names in theology (Korean women) but then realize that who they are personally (lesbian) is ignored or unacknowledged.

Our understanding of communities of accountability must be turned on its head.

Rather than narrowing the circle to those neighbors to whom we feel accountable (for example, lesbians, African American women, or Latinas), we must redefine communities of accountability to be those people with whom we have *the least in common*. If I am to insure that my analysis is truly multiplicative and that it leads me to see myself and others within the complex system of dominant powers in which we are all implicated and from which we benefit in varying ways, my analysis must force me to build bridges across those various powers. Regardless of who I am, my community of accountability must be women and men who are unlike me in race, class, sexual orientation, ability, religious practice, national identity, and so forth, as well as women like me. This is the only way to insure that my analysis will enable me to see the lives of all those to whom I am accountable. For, in this model, no one escapes being my neighbor. *All* may make moral demands upon me; moreover, the person whom I am *least* likely to recognize and understand, and whom I am most likely to hurt with my analysis, is the person to whom I am particularly accountable.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite writes, "The ability to be permeable to other people is the foundation of community and what we could mean theologically were we really to allow ourselves to hear the radical embodiment of ecclesiological constructions such as 'body of Christ.'"⁶⁵ A feminist liberation theology of the neighbor employs hooks's multilayered analysis as the best means to achieve such permeability. All human beings are created in God's image, but dominant systems of power operate to mask that divine reflection. They try to prevent us from recognizing God in our neighbors, because if we could do this, then sexism, racism, and other structural evils would become more vulnerable to collective assault. We cannot demonize the other if we see the divine in him. We cannot categorize the other as immoral if she reflects God to us. A theology that enables me to recognize another as my neighbor, someone to whom I am accountable before God, is a theology that renders me permeable to God's passion for love and justice, and permeable to the other I am not meant to see.

A second theoretical contribution that a feminist liberation theology of the neighbor makes is to expose how theology often reifies a public/private split, at its best advocating justice in the public sphere but usually failing to advocate justice at home. This split also occurs in feminist theory. hooks asks, "Where can we find a body of feminist theory that is directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life? What feminist theory, for example, is directed toward assisting women who live in sexist households in their efforts to bring about feminist change?"⁶⁶ When it comes to the private realm, religion is often used as a trump card to keep women in a subservient role. Together, feminist theory and theology can envision a politics of home.

Theologies are always public theologies in that they are culturally informed and they have public effects. Religious traditions are impacted by the world in which they exist, and they in turn impact that world. But while religious traditions are often quick to condemn various forms of violence around the world, and to advocate for justice, they rarely extend that advocacy to the realm of the home. James Poling explains that "The spiritual hierarchy of women and men within the church

corresponds with the political and economic inequality of women and men within society. Some churches are unwilling to face the way in which a theology of inequality leads to a vulnerability of women and children to violence.”⁶⁷

A feminist liberation theology of the neighbor recognizes that one’s neighbors are both those living under the same roof and those far away. For that reason, theology must expose injustice in the home as well as around the world. Theology must have “nesting potential,” in that it must create justice in one’s primary relationships.⁶⁸ As María Pilar Aquino argues, the home is a great laboratory for testing theology. Theology should result in awareness of oppression in women’s primary relationships and create justice in daily life.⁶⁹

If a theology does not have nesting potential, if it fails to create justice at home, and if it fails to reject public policies that are hostile to women, then it is not a theology that will create justice and disrupt dominant systems of power in the wider world. The patriarchal family is not good for women or men. In its ultimate configuration, men feel free to use violence to control their partners.⁷⁰ Thus, a critical feminist liberation theology of the neighbor requires transformation of our social and personal worlds; it demands justice in the streets *and* justice in the most intimate contours of our lives.

Is this vision of theology overly ambitious? Perhaps. But as hooks has pointed out so frequently, left unchallenged, dominant systems of power will destroy the “least of these” among us and simultaneously hide their involvement in that destruction. They will keep us from seeing those who are not in our own communities as well as those who are. They will shore up epistemic regimes of knowledge that “explain” injustice as natural or unavoidable, and they will demonize or render invisible those who are least powerful in this world. If we do not fight these systems, even in some small way every day, we are part of the machine of commonsense ideology that speeds up exponentially at every opportunity. A critical feminist liberation theology of the neighbor requires a practice of ethics and theory wherein the “least of these” are made visible in all their vulnerability; political practice is a necessary outcome of analysis; and all analytical movement begins with a self-analysis of how I am part of the injustice I fight. It is a political and public theology of struggle that requires that I cross boundaries of difference to reach out to my neighbor. It requires that I acknowledge our revolutionary interdependence.

The theoretical work that hooks has done across the decades provides a road map for what movement to the neighbor entails. In her analysis, it is clear that such movement is not simply an emotional response to another but a radical political act that requires a thorough analysis of dominant systems of power in order to understand what love of neighbor means and requires. The story of the Good Samaritan focuses on the agency of the subject; in the agent’s action, notions of love and justice are brought together.⁷¹ It is this requirement to forge love and justice into one act that arises from the ethical mandate to love one’s neighbor as oneself, the same mandate that permeates hooks’s work. hooks uses theory to identify power systems and to analyze how they operate in order to follow what I believe is a central ethical claim for critical feminist liberation theologies: to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. By analyzing how power systems function, we find out why certain of our neighbors

are so difficult for us to recognize as neighbors or so easy for us to forget or ignore. We understand, and then we change those power systems. As hooks reminds us, love is the first and final word: “To return to love, to know perfect love, we surrender the will to power.”⁷² Such revolutionary love creates the possibility for revolutionary interdependence, and social transformation is not possible without it.

Notes

1. Chapter epigraph: bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Holt, 1995).
2. hooks explains that she uses this phrase “to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation’s politics.” See bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 17.
3. bell hooks, *Killing Rage*.
4. hooks uses this phrase in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 75, she uses the phrase “dominator culture.”
5. bell hooks, interview by Helen Tworckov, “Agent of Change: An Interview with bell hooks,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1992): 56. Much of hooks’s work from the 1990s forward has focused on this theme. See especially *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), and *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End, 1993).
6. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 118. See also bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 62, 64.
7. In one of her most recent books, hooks provides a concrete example of how engaging each other facilitates solidarity and connection. See bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Baines, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (Boston: South End Press, 2006).
8. Critical solidarity begins when one sees others as “caught” between and within interlocking webs of power and decides to stand beside them to fight that power system, disavowing oneself (at times) from the privilege that those power systems bestow upon oneself.
9. Cornel West, in bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 34–35.
10. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 114.
11. See sketch in Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 117.
12. Margaret Urban Walker coined this term. See *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.
13. Reported in a PBS *First Measured Century* program, “The New Immigrants, Head Shapes, and the Melting Pot: Franz Boas vs. Scientific Racism,” segments 1900–1930, <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/segments/progseg2.htm>. Eugenacists seized on the army IQ tests to prove to Congress that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were a threat to the biological makeup of the nation. Henry Laughlin, from the Eugenics Record Office, testified before Congress on the results of the tests. On that basis Congress passed sweeping restrictions on immigration in 1924.
14. For a thorough discussion of this process, see Walker, *Moral Understandings*.
15. hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 97.
16. hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 66–68.
17. hooks, *Yearning*, 94. Hooks writes about challenges of reaching such solidarity in various places. See, for example, chap. 7, “Holding My Sister’s Hand: Feminist Solidarity,” in *Teaching to Transgress*.
18. hooks, Preface in *Feminist Theory*.
19. hooks, *Yearning*, 75.
20. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 8.
21. hooks, *Yearning*, 74ff.
22. *Ibid.*, 9.
23. hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 162.

24. hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 244.
25. hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 16.
26. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
27. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), quoted in *ibid.*, 5.
28. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 248.
29. *Ibid.*, 243.
30. *Ibid.*, 243–44.
31. *Ibid.*, 241.
32. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 39.
33. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 244.
34. hooks, *All about Love*, 93.
35. *Ibid.*, 83.
36. For hooks's discussion of these developments see *Salvation*, chap. 1.
37. hooks, *Salvation*, 9.
38. In contrast, movements such as that led by Martin Luther King, Jr. were focused on love (with a mandate to create the “Beloved Community” by loving one's enemies) and called for the radical transformation of society. “King realized that a love ethic was central to any meaningful challenge to domination,” an insight hooks calls “prophetic” (*Ibid.*, 10). Hooks quotes King's reference to the Beloved Community on p. 7.
39. hooks, *All about Love*, 77.
40. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 127.
41. hooks, *All about Love*, 83.
42. *Ibid.*, 77.
43. hooks, *Salvation*, 225.
44. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), quoted in *ibid.*, 7.
45. hooks, *Will to Change*, 18.
46. For a discussion of how the Bible has been both helpful and unhelpful to self-esteem, see hooks, *Rock My Soul*, chap. 8, and *Salvation*, chap. 3. For a discussion of the connection between self-sacrifice and low self-esteem, see *Rock My Soul*, 173ff., and hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 155f.
47. Hooks discusses the blaming of poor for being poor in *Where We Stand*, 42–45 and 66–68.
48. The earliest work to articulate a theology of liberation was Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Teología de la liberación* in December 1971. Other key early figures were Catholics Segundo Galilea, Juan Luis Segundo, and Lucio Gera, and Protestants Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana, Rubem Alves, and José Míguez Bonino. For a history of liberation theology, see Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987). The first theologian to argue that God was on the side of the oppressed was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian imprisoned for participating in a plot against Adolf Hitler's life. See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
49. hooks, *All about Love*, 74.
50. Examples of religious beliefs invoked to support status quo systems of power are numerous. For example, a few involve upholding sexist divisions of labor, supporting a gospel of wealth wherein the more material goods one gets the more evidence of God's divine favor one possesses.
51. One could argue that when Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Women's Bible*, in 1895 (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* [part 1 1895, part 2 in 1898; repr., Salem, NH: Ayer, 1991]) she and the committee she worked with became the first feminist theologians. Some early key figures in the current feminist theology movement (most of whom are still writing) are Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Letty Russell. Among the earliest African American writers, who referred to themselves as “Womanist” after Alice Walker's definition, are Delores Williams, Jacqueline Grant, and Sheila Greeve Devaney. Early Latina writers in the North American context include Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, Inés Talamentez, and María Pilar Aquino. Theologians who wrote some of the first Asian American feminist liberation works include Chung Hyun Kyung and Kwok Pui-Lan.
52. I use *critical* to underscore the ideas of critique, crisis, and assessment. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's explication of the term in *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis,

- MN: Fortress, 1999), 9: "A critical approach is interested in weighing, evaluating, and judging texts and their contexts, in exploring crisis situations and seeking their adjudications. Its goals and functions are opposite to those of a more positivist approach of 'pure' science." There are numerous examples of the use of theology to reinforce systems of power. For an example of how the Bible was used to justify slavery, see Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995). For one of the earliest critiques of the use of Christianity against women, see Matilda Joselyn Gage's book, *Woman, Church, and State* (1893; repr., Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002).
53. Gospel of wealth proponents around the turn of the nineteenth century are of this ilk, as is the contemporary Christian Coalition, for example. For an examination of the impact of these religious groups on the welfare-reform debates of the early 1990s, see Nancy E. Nienhuis, "Neighbors and Other Strangers: Poor Women, Critical Feminist Liberation Theology, and Welfare-Reform Rhetoric" (ThD diss., Harvard University, 2001).
 54. *All About Love*, p. 82.
 55. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1998), 248.
 56. Hooks discusses this in various places. See, for example, hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 129.
 57. Examples abound; particularly pertinent are Gage, *Woman, Church, and State*; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, and Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838; repr., New York: Source Book, 1970).
 58. Early examples of this tendency to name women as the community for whom one was writing include Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (1960), repr. in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995); Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); various works by Mary Daly, including *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) and *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); and Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980).
 59. Examples of this critique include Delores Williams, "The Color of Feminism, or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," *Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1986); Jacqueline Grant, "Black Theology and Black Women"; Sheila Greeve Devaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Woman's Experience," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1987); and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
 60. There were some notable exceptions, including Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose early work was already critiquing androcentric frameworks of power. See, for example, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).
 61. Works in this vein include Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha = In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), as well as many articles, such as "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), "African American Women Develop a New Theological Vision" (*Brown Papers*, 1, no. 1, Women's Theological Center, Boston., October 1994), and "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices" (1989), repr. in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Cheryl Sanders, ed., *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).
 62. Examples include Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990);

- Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986).
63. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 13.
64. Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*. Hyun Kyung and I discussed these issues during the semester in which she was a visiting scholar in the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School, spring 1993.
65. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Militarism in North American Perspective," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).
66. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 70.
67. James Poling, *Deliver Us from Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 134.
68. Chung first used this phrase; see *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*.
69. See Aquino, *Our Cry for Life*, 114–15.
70. Battering is the extreme end of injustice in the home, but injustice is present in less extreme ways as well, and they create a barrier to the best that family life has to offer. One study surveyed recent research on family life and found that "the happiest families are those in which both husband and wife have some paid employment, share household chores and childcare, and work less than two full-time positions. There is arresting new evidence that fathers are happier and healthier if involved in child care, just as mothers are happier and healthier if they participate in paid work." See Don S. Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 317. The authors also discuss a 1993 Harvard study that found similar results: when both parents worked a total of fewer than sixty hours per week, they were happier than when both worked full-time or when the wife stayed home. There was more intimacy between the couple, more bonding between the parents after the birth of a child, the husband was more involved in child care, and the wife was slightly less depressed. Both partners also had greater optimism about the future. The old-style patriarchal family is not good for women or men, and it is certainly not a just relational arrangement.
71. I thank Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for this insight; personal communication, December 1998.
72. hooks, *All about Love*, 221.

14

Toward a Love Ethic

Love and Spirituality in bell hooks's Writing

SUSANA VEGA-GONZÁLEZ

Introduction

One of bell hooks's latest publications, a book of poetry insightfully entitled *When Angels Speak of Love*,¹ encompasses two of the themes hooks has focused on in some of her most recent works, namely love and spirituality. Although she has acknowledged that love has always been present in her writings,² she has devoted a trilogy of works entirely to the multidimensional essence of love and its social, ethnic, religious, and sexual implications. After *All About Love: New Visions*, a general study of love, hooks published *Salvation: Black People and Love*, a book on the complexity of love in the African American community in the United States from the time of slavery to the present, and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* in which hooks explores the issue of love and women. This trilogy was followed by *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, which constitutes an analysis of the workings of love—or its absence—in the lives of men within a patriarchal system. It is out of the need for an inexistent critical research on the subject of love that hooks endeavors to explore the reasons that have led to a generalized absence and devaluation of love in U.S. society. Likewise, she advocates the implementation of a love ethic conducive to the psychological, social, and spiritual growth of both men and women in the African American community. According to hooks, “Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism.”³

Love, together with death and spirituality, has always been a key issue in African American culture and it has been extensively dealt with in African American literature. Thus, it is not surprising that one of its foremost representatives and the author hooks wrote her dissertation on, Toni Morrison, devoted much of her work to the theme of love and its paradoxes. Like hooks, Morrison wrote her latest novel, *Love*, out of a need to expose the absence—rather than the presence, of love, which is often mistaken for other quite different feelings such as lust, need, jealousy, or affection. Morrison shares with hooks not only her concern over the lack of love but also her pondering upon the unfathomable capacity human beings have to destroy what they most love. On the other hand, hooks's advocacy of the practice

of self-love as the basis for personal and communal well-being echoes Baby Suggs's exhortations to self-love and community love in Morrison's *Beloved*.

This chapter aims to explore the roots of hooks's special interest in love and spirituality, which occupies the focus of an important part of her writing. Likewise, I will analyze her contribution to the implementation of a love ethic among African Americans from a dialogical standpoint, where love and spirituality intermingle to undermine the ravages of lovelessness and "soul murder"⁴ in modern U.S. society and within the African American community.

Absent Love

The absence and debasement of love among African Americans and in contemporary U.S. society at large, triggers hooks's critical delving into an increasing need for a love ethic. The elusive and complex concept of love is subject to diverse interpretations and definitions; and too often love is taken for what it is not. Taking her cue from psychiatrist Scott Peck and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, hooks embraces a holistic conception of love, which takes into account its spiritual dimension. According to Peck's definition, love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."⁵ For Erich Fromm, love "always implies certain basic elements, common to all forms of love. These are care, responsibility, respect and knowledge."⁶ Both authors agree that love is volitional, based on will and choice, it is an intention and, most importantly, an action, an activity. Furthermore, Fromm suggests that since love is an art, it must be cultivated and learned from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, in the same way as we learn any other art.⁷ However, as Fromm and other authors have pointed out, contemporary U.S. society is not an appropriate breeding ground for the cultivation of love due to the presence of a series of elements which invite the misconception and stifling of real love. In *A General Theory of Love*, Thomas Lewis stresses the importance of the connections among humans at a limbic level for their general well-being. And love plays a crucial role in those connections. However, "Instead of protecting us from the frailties of the limbic brain, American culture magnifies them by obscuring the nature and need for love."⁸ In the same light, in *Race Matters*, African American philosopher Cornel West exposes the evils of capitalism as one of the causes for the disruption of love and the ensuing nihilism that pervades contemporary U.S. society and Western culture and, in particular, manifests itself within African American lived spaces:

The proper starting point for the crucial debate about the prospects for black America is an examination of the nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities. Nihilism...is...the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.⁹

In a similar vein, throughout her work, hooks focuses on the pernicious effects capitalism and patriarchy in U.S. society have had on the capacity of its members,

both men and women, to love and be loved. In a society that values material growth over human values and is driven by hedonistic tendencies and the accumulation of material wealth, there is not a proper place for love, since, as hooks repeatedly contends, systems of domination and power always preclude the presence and the practice of love. The ensuing inability to love oneself and others leads instead to emotionally impaired people whose internal lack will never be fulfilled by anything other than love. The inner emptiness and “constant feelings of lack”¹⁰ created by consumerism and hedonistic materialism, together with the absence of love, cause pain, stress, anxiety, and depression. Generalized alienation and detachment take over “in the daily lives of African Americans across classes”¹¹ thus engendering feelings of unhappiness. In this system, mass media plays a crucial role, contributing to the creation of new necessities in people’s lives which foster consumerism, hedonism, and a pervasive “need to grasp.”¹² As hooks concludes, “The mass media conveys the message that if your life is simple it has no meaning.”¹³

Apart from capitalism, patriarchy is the other major cause of the absence of love, as hooks exposes in her work. hooks’s trenchant indictment of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and capitalism is precisely associated with the lack of love, which gives way to the workings of oppression, domination, and discrimination. The masculine eagerness to dominate and possess in patriarchal society hinders the proper development and practice of love. In the patriarchal system, love is based on a dynamics of power which renders effective the dialectics of domination and submission. Thus, rather than seeing love in the light of mutuality and reciprocity, it is seen as being given by one party and received by another.¹⁴ On the other hand, patriarchy renders men incapable of loving. Since the expression of emotions and feelings is deemed improper for a man in the patriarchal system, males tend to repress that part of themselves to put up a mask of “emotional strength.”¹⁵ Moreover, hooks relates how forms of devaluing vulnerability functioned vis-à-vis the history of African American people in the United States, whose hiding of an existing vulnerability was used as a survival strategy in a hostile environment.¹⁶ However, such inability to feel gives way to the lack of the necessary connection with others, which in turn, has as the final outcome the lack of love. Due to all these reasons, as hooks concludes, lovelessness affects U.S. society in general but it is even more predominant in the African American population and even more among males, since “patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.”¹⁷ hooks’s own life experience attests to the fact that patriarchy takes its toll on both males and females when it comes to the workings of love.

In her two autobiographies, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* and *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*,¹⁸ hooks refers to the patriarchal figure her father represented and the strong influence such an image had on her. It was actually from this first-hand experience that hooks soon realized that she did not want to be in a position of subservience to male power, as her mother was. hooks writes that: “Up until I left home, I lost all battles with my father. His word was law. It was impossible to love him or to feel his love. He was the patriarch who inspired fear, not love. The last battle between my father and me occurred over my desire to attend Stanford University.... I defied the will of my father. And I did not die.”¹⁹

Having witnessed her father's violence against her mother, hooks became adamant about never getting married and never being dominated by any man: "I will not obey" she defiantly states.²⁰ Actually, from her troubled childhood and her feeling of alienation and lack of real love, from her suffering the evils of patriarchy from such an early age, hooks admits that "It was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered."²¹ Both her childhood years in Kentucky and her college years at Stanford University are heavily marked by a constant yearning for a hard-to-find love. In hindsight, the person hooks remembers most in terms of showing her love was her grandfather Daddy Gus, "her favorite man in the whole world. He loved and adored but most importantly he accepted her just as she was.... He was love in her life."²² The powerful feelings of alienation, loneliness, misunderstanding, fear, and incomprehension felt during her childhood trigger off an internal split between mind and body.²³ Her main interest was the realm of words and poetry. She was not interested in food and the body, and at the same time she feared she would be too ugly and skinny to be accepted. Not only is she raised in a racist and sexist environment in Kentucky in the 1950s, attending a segregated school, but she is also ostracized in her own home because of her desire to devote herself to reading and writing and to become a free soul through a longed-for self-realization: "I hear again and again that I am crazy, that I will end up in a mental institution. This is my punishment for wanting to finish reading before doing my work."²⁴

It is amidst this discouraging atmosphere that hooks experiences an internal rift that enhances her estrangement from others and from herself and increases her yearning to belong and be loved. Although she deals with the great love she felt for her mother, she longs for a different kind of love she would have liked to have from her. hooks writes that:

I am a pain to her. She says that she is not sure where I come from, that she would like to send me back. I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is myself, my own, not just a thing I have been turned into that she can desire, like, or do with as she will. I want her to love me totally as I am. I love her totally without wanting that she change anything, not even the things about her that I cannot stand.²⁵

Furthermore, although hooks acknowledges that her mother tries to provide for more than the basic necessities of a child, gradually "she is moving away from her awareness of the deeper inner things of life and worrying more about money.... I want her never to lose what she has given me—a sense that there is something deeper, something more to this life than the everyday."²⁶ That effort to provide for the nurturance of the soul and the inner space is precisely one of the crucial components of the multilayered nature of love, since care by itself is not enough.

Broken Spirits

Hooks's adherence to M. Scott Peck's definition of love as intrinsically related to a person's spiritual growth points to the importance spiritual matters have in her life and writing. Her study of love appears inseparable from spirituality, creating a dialogue where one part informs the other.²⁷ In her upbringing in a segregated society,

spirituality conveyed the enforcement of “critical resistance” against racism and oppression.²⁸ Throughout her work, hooks attests to the vital role spirituality played in her life, contributing to her personal recovery and well-being. As she states:

On my way to becoming feminist thinker, writer, and cultural critic I walked further and further away from father and son, but my steps always drew me closer to holy spirit.... Spirituality has always been the foundation of my experience as a writer. Most writers know that our visions often emerge from places that are mysterious—far removed from who we are and what we think we know. Faced with this reality again and again as we work with words, we can only acknowledge the presence of an unseen force.²⁹

Feminist indictment and revision of patriarchal religion fostered a new way of approaching religious beliefs and spirituality, recovering the “sacred feminine” obscured by the patriarchal system³⁰ and undermining the sustained binary opposites such as good/evil, physical/spiritual, Madonna/whore, etc., that had worked against discriminated social groups like women and, even more, black women.

The spirituality hooks deals with is “not in the sense of organized ritual but in the more metaphysical sense of cultivating care of the soul.”³¹ It is therefore more deeply connected to inner well-being and nourishment than to religious practices. In this sense, spirituality is, as Margaret Walker contends, “being centered in a consciousness of divinity within all the time.”³² The absence of religious practice does not necessarily exclude spirituality, as Gloria Wade-Gayles points out:

Institutionalized religion requires us to be a congregation following an unchanging order of worship and believing in a dogma, both of which have been linked to oppression throughout the history of human civilization. But spirituality frees us to worship wherever, however and with whomever we so desire... in celebration of the divine that is in us and in the entire universe.³³

In spite of her belief in the Christian God and her reference to episodes from the life of Christ to illustrate the necessity to cultivate and come to terms with one's inner life and integrity in a final state of enlightenment, hooks adopts a flexible eclectic stand and expands her spiritual scope in search of new religious beliefs and spiritualities. Thus, during her college years she starts to study Buddhism and Islamic mysticism³⁴ and she finally reaches the conclusion that “more and more I think that Zen Buddhism is the path I most want to follow.”³⁵ In Zen Buddhism, hooks encounters a way to inner healing of soul wounds through mindfulness, focusing on the present moment, meditation, and love of oneself and others, tenets that she draws mainly from two Buddhist spiritual guides or teachers who are constantly present in her life and writing, namely Trungpa Rinpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh. In her foreword to *The Raft Is Not the Shore*³⁶ by Thich Nhat Hanh and Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, hooks refers to what is part of the essence of Buddhism and what most probably made her decide to follow this particular kind of spirituality: the nondualistic nature of Buddhism present in the connection and syncretism between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of life on the one hand, and the connection between spirituality and politics on the other.³⁷ She credits Nhat Hanh precisely for

introducing “countless people not only to Buddhism but to a way of reintegrating physical and spiritual life, aspects of life that are often seen in our culture as being on opposite shores of a wide river.”³⁸ She sees in spirituality an antidote to the workings of oppression and domination and a path to self-realization and inner wholeness. Regarding the integration of spirituality in the social and political arena, Toni Cade Bambara’s words on the same issue come to mind. Referring to the genesis of her novel *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara states:

I was trying to figure out as a community worker why political folk were so distant from the spiritual community—clairvoyants, mediums, those kind of folks, whom I was always studying with. Why don’t we have a bridge language so that clairvoyants can talk to revolutionaries?...I was...trying to do justice to that realm of reality that we all live in but do not acknowledge, because the English language is for mercantile business and not for the interior life.³⁹

The close connection with spirituality is also characteristic of African societies⁴⁰ by which hooks’s intellectual and spiritual life is also informed as an African American woman. One of her childhood memories is precisely her maternal grandmother Baba’s home, which was full of magic and creativity.⁴¹ Her very pseudonym, taken after her great-grandmother, has a lot to do with her belief in the ancestral: “When the name bell hooks is called, the spirit of my great-grandmother rises.”⁴² The predominance of spirituality in bell hooks is thus in keeping with the spiritual dimension of African American culture from the times of slavery. Through the belief in the otherworldly, enslaved black people found a way to survive their lot and to avoid spiritual and psychological enslavement. Despite the white owners’ attempts to erase the slaves’ original culture, religion, and belief system, enslaved Africans managed to preserve part of that legacy. Dealing with the spiritual charge of African Americans in the United States, Houston A. Baker, Jr. refers to the special “concern for metalevels, rather than tangible products” as a defining trait of the African American intellectual discourse, concluding that “Primary to their survival was the work of *consciousness*, of nonmaterial counterintelligence.”⁴³ Enslaved blacks’ belief in the presence and guidance of ancestors, the close connection between the living and the dead, kept them joined to the kin they could not physically be with. The presence of spirits of dead family members provided the necessary guidance, encouragement, and resiliency to survive amidst the evils of slavery. As Elliott Gorn argues, “Ghostlore metaphorically denied that blacks could ever become pure property, cut off from blood dependencies. Belief in the return of supernatural visitors helped undermine the legitimacy of natal alienation...by affirming the importance of deep kinship ties in the daily activities of black men and women.”⁴⁴ Apart from providing the downtrodden enslaved population with relief from their harsh life and hope for a better future, spirituality has always been a key issue in African American culture. While hooks acknowledges the capacity to learn the art of love by both men and women, she finds spirituality more deeply connected to women. This is a connection that has been extensively dealt with in the literature written by contemporary African American female writers some of whom hooks mentions in her work on love and spirituality.⁴⁵

The pervasive nihilism and alienation present in U.S. society and among African Americans is also the outcome of spiritual crisis, apart from the absence of true love. This crisis is the cause of unhappiness and pain. In one of her conversations with Cornel West, hooks laments the fact that “many Black people...are no longer engaged with Black religious experience.”⁴⁶ The absence of love, of which spirituality forms a significant part, as I have maintained, brings about spiritual death. Instead of looking inside themselves in the present, people in modern capitalist society focus on worries about the future and on matters which hinder spiritual nourishment, drifting in the fast pace of a system that engulfs its members in a pernicious turmoil, moving them apart from spirituality. As Cornel West reminds us in conversation with bell hooks when she asks about the devaluation of spirituality: “what is eroding it is consumerism, hedonism, narcissism, privatism, and careerism of Americans in general, and Black Americans in particular.... We must have spokesmen for genuine love, care, sacrifice, and risk in the face of market forces that highlight buying, selling, and profit making.”⁴⁷

As it happened with love, not only capitalism but also patriarchy contributes to the annihilation of spiritual growth, since both are based on the dynamics of control and power. In both cases, the individual is not a free spirit but is subject to the dictates of coercive forces. In the case of patriarchy, men are not only victimizers over women but are also victims themselves of the patriarchal system, as it dehumanizes them, depriving them of the capacity to feel, to connect and to really love, making them “emotional cripples.”⁴⁸ The rage that some men feel, which is again for some expressed in domestic violence against women, has a lot to do with this process.⁴⁹

After having exposed the sociocultural context in which a crisis of both love and spirituality is at work, it is necessary to focus now on the course of action bell hooks proposes to undermine and eradicate such a crisis. According to hooks, this situation calls for a necessary implementation of a love ethic, which entails a complexity of elements that will be analyzed in the following section.

Love Ethic

From her early writings, bell hooks has proposed a love ethic as the only way to counteract the negative effects of what she defines as an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy”⁵⁰ which U.S. society embodies. As the most powerful moving force among humans, love is vital for their emotional, psychological, and even physical well-being. Scientific research shows the vital importance of love for a healthy physical and emotional development of children, as well as the fact that adolescents who lack limbic (or emotional) connectedness at home are more prone to venture into the world of violence and drug consumption.⁵¹ Love is life sustaining and the engine which promotes spiritual growth. The ethic of love claimed in hooks’s work is an ethic that encompasses both self-love and love of others. Thus hooks tackles head-on the problematics of lovelessness elevating her dissertations on the subject to the intellectual arena precisely because, as Carla Locatelli argues, “repression of the lack of love is easier and stronger than its denunciation.”⁵² Once again, hooks

is adamant about denouncing such lack despite the risk she runs of being seen as “getting soft.”⁵³ But the love hooks deals with is not limited to romantic love but it is approached in its multifarious modalities and from a critical sociopolitical viewpoint, since as hooks admits, “Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth.... The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change.”⁵⁴

The first step toward the enforcement of a love ethic, according to hooks, is awareness of one’s reality of nihilism and the sociopolitical forces that have led to it. Awareness entails interrogation of the conditions of such reality and its consequences, calling into question the dynamics of oppression and domination at work. Only through the initial awareness of pain, “self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking”⁵⁵ can love come to fruition.

Self-love is crucial in the development of a love ethic. In the downtrodden, dehumanized, and discriminated against African American population, it is not unusual that low self-esteem, internalized racism, and self-hatred take hold of its members. A process of internal decolonization is called for by hooks in which self-love is privileged and practiced, as the insightful discourse of the preacher and spiritual guide Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* suggests:

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh...love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.”⁵⁶

Self-love is the foundation of the love of others since, as Audre Lorde aptly contends, “I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving.”⁵⁷

The love ethic is also based on an ethos of connectedness, both with the spirit within ourselves and with others. Feeling connected very much contributes to the finding of wholeness and definitely to love.⁵⁸ In their analysis of the limbic brain, Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon elaborate on the vitality of connectedness in humans and its direct relationship to the development of love, concluding that “Because mammals need relatedness for their neurophysiology to coalesce correctly, most of what makes a socially functional human comes from connection—the shaping physiologic force of love.”⁵⁹ The idea of partnership and mutuality is likewise put forward by feminism. As hooks exposes, feminist thinking goes against the “dominator model” and advocates instead a “partnership model that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings.”⁶⁰ Such a model will be reinforced through the willingness to openly express feelings and emotions as well as through the development of the four components of true love according to Buddhist thinking, namely benevolence, compassion, joy and freedom.⁶¹

In her own experience, hooks acknowledges the power of love and spirituality to bridge the gap created in her childhood between body and mind. Learning how to love, practicing the art of loving on a daily basis, together with the focus on mindfulness centered on the present moment, hooks is finally able to experience healing

and spiritual growth. And her celebration of the much needed reconciliation with herself and with her formerly despised, unloving father attests to that growth.

Since love is an act of will, an action, a choice, it is intrinsically associated with the idea of agency. Thus, a love ethic stimulates and enhances the power to act and to choose, “a sense of agency”⁶² that oppressed people and spiritually dead people initially lack. Apart from representing a means of empowerment, having the possibility of exerting agency conveys the exercise of freedom, which is another key element in the process of self-realization of a human being. Therefore, a love ethic fosters and leads to freedom, proving to be a powerful resource toward the liberation of broken, fettered spirits.

Conclusion

Bell hooks's concern with love and spirituality from her early writings has finally been fully developed in her latest publications, where she extensively and insightfully theorizes the dynamics of these two forces in modern U.S. society, as we have explored. Drawing on her personal experience as an African American woman from the South, she expands her scope onto the social and political arena. Setting as an example the love ethic implemented by Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement, hooks advocates the presence of love and the ensuing spiritual growth as the only way for transformation and as the key to “meaningful political revolutions.”⁶³ There is an urgent need for what Cornel West terms “a politics of conversion”⁶⁴ through which a world of lovelessness, violence, oppression, domination, and dehumanization can be turned into a world where a love ethic is privileged. Love is the redemptive power and healing force that can heal the wounds of contemporary society. In Toni Morrison's words, “whatever the demons are—love can un-demonize them.”⁶⁵

hooks undertakes her critical exploration from the standpoint of a visionary feminist and also from her location as an African American woman. From that vantage point hooks knows that nothing will work better toward the rebirth of a person, a community, and a whole nation than the implementation of a love ethic, bearing in mind that “The space of our lack is also the space of possibility.”⁶⁶ This is the creative, encouraging, life-infusing spirit hooks writes from. In the same way as compost is transformed into flowers, stagnant lovelessness and spiritual death must be transformed into evolving love and spiritual growth since, otherwise, “In a culture whose members are ravenous for love and ignorant of its workings, too many will invest their love in a barren corporate lot, and will reap a harvest of dust.”⁶⁷ A love ethic will certainly warrant the success of such transformation so that, instead of a harvest of dust contemporary men and women can envision and finally enjoy the fruits of a harvest of love and spiritual connection.

Notes

1. hooks, *When Angels Speak of Love: Poems* (New York: Atria Books, 2007).
2. Gary Dauphin, “What's Love Got To Do With It? A Conversation With Writer/Painter/Cultural Critic bell hooks About Her Love Books,” *Black Issues Book Review*, 4, no. 2 (March–April, 2002). 50–51.

3. hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 289.
4. hooks borrows the expression “soul murder” from the field of psychiatry to refer to the incapacity to give and feel love and the ensuing alienation from one’s self. See hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 23; hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 137.
5. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (1978; repr., New York: Touchstone, 2003), 81.
6. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (1956; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 24.
7. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 5.
8. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 192.
9. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 22–23.
10. Bell hooks, “SIMPLE LIVING: An Antidote to Hedonistic Materialism,” in *Black Genius: African American Solutions to African American Problems*, ed. Walter Mosley, Manthia Diawara, Clyde Taylor, and Regina Austin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 138.
11. hooks, “SIMPLE LIVING,” 138.
12. Barry Boyce, “Love Fights the Power,” *Shambhala Sun*, July 2006, 90.
13. hooks, “SIMPLE LIVING,” 141.
14. hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 101.
15. hooks, *We Real Cool*, 122.
16. *Ibid.*, 122.
17. *Ibid.*, 66.
18. hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996) and hooks, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).
19. hooks, *Communion: the Female Search for Love* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 25.
20. hooks, *Bone Black*, 151.
21. hooks *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Perennial, 2000), ix.
22. hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 90.
23. For a critical analysis of hooks’s autobiography *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, and the process that hooks undergoes from alienation to healing and rebirth, see Susana Vega-González, “The Dialectics of Belonging in bell hooks’ *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*,” *Journal of English Studies* 3 (2001): 237–48.
24. hooks, *Bone Black*, 101.
25. *Ibid.*, 140.
26. *Ibid.*, 141.
27. Love as a spiritually loaded concept can be identified with *agape*, as Adam Gussow suggests, which is one of the types of love Martin Luther King, Jr. distinguished, apart from *eros* and *philia*. *Agape* is differentiated from *eros* and *philia* by its connection with divine love. See Adam Gussow, “‘Where Is the Love?’: Racial Violence, Racial Healing, and Blues Communities,” *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 39, 41.
28. hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 179.
29. hooks, “When the Spirit Moves You,” *Shambhala Sun* (March 1998), <http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=2301> (accessed October 16, 2008).
30. hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody*, 109.
31. hooks, *We Real Cool*, 142.
32. Dilla Buckner, “Spirituality, Sexuality, and Creativity: A Conversation with Margaret Walker-Alexander,” in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston, Beacon Press, 1995), 224.
33. Wade-Gayles, *My Soul Is a Witness*, 4.
34. hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 152.
35. *Ibid.*, 154.
36. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (1975; repr., New York, Orbis Books, 2001).

37. hooks, "Foreword," in Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft Is Not the Shore*, vii.
38. Ibid., xii.
39. Louis Massiah, "How She Came by Her Name": An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara," in Toni Cade Bambara, *Deep Sights and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 235.
40. See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969; repr., Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 4; and Margaret W. Creel, "Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 81–82.
41. hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, 91.
42. hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 166.
43. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* 43 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 38.
44. Elliott J. Gorn, "Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 559.
45. hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 184. Among the works of spiritual healing hooks refers to are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1981), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).
46. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 129.
47. Ibid., 52.
48. hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 27.
49. hooks, *The Will to Change*, 72–73.
50. Ibid., 2.
51. Lewis et al., *A General Theory of Love*, 213, 219. As a matter of fact, the absence of limbic connection with machines, exemplified in the extensive use of computers and the Internet, leads to loneliness and depression. See *ibid.*, 198–99.
52. Carla Locatelli, "Women's Ways of Knowing: It Is All About Love!" *Organization* 14, no. 3 (2007): 346.
53. hooks, *Communion*, 154.
54. hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 16–17.
55. hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 295.
56. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Books, 1987), 88–89.
57. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 174.
58. One of the poems included in hooks's book of poetry *When Angels Speak of Love* (81), encloses the idea of connection as well as that of rebirth and spirituality.
59. Lewis et al., *A General Theory of Love*, 218.
60. hooks, *The Will to Change*, 117.
61. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart* (Boston; London: Shambhala, 2006) and *Teachings on Love* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2007).
62. West, *Race Matters*, 29.
63. hooks, "Foreword," in *Young Wives' Tales: New Adventures in Love and Partnership*, ed. Jill Corral and Lisa Miya-Jervis (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2001), xiv.
64. West, *Race Matters*, 29.
65. Toni Morrison, interview by Evan Solomon, CBC News World, November 18, 2003., <http://www.cbc.ca/hotttype/season03-04/03-11-18.html> (accessed October 16, 2008).
66. hooks, *All About Love*, 221.
67. Lewis et al., *A General Theory of Love*, 217. We borrow the metaphor of the compost and the flowers from Thich Nhat Hanh, who explains how in the nondual essence of Buddhism "the waste materials of the conscious mind" (Nhat Hanh, *True Love*, 67) must not be discarded but must be instead transformed into positive energy and feelings.

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