Reader Response

bell hooks on Literacy and Teaching: A Response

JOYCE IRENE MIDDLETON

Reading bell hooks' interview with JAC was empowering for me because I am currently exploring and analyzing the ways in which African American feminist perspectives on literacy transform the traditional, lingering conceptions of Western, academic literacy. Hooks' thoughts about audience, about the uses of narrative as a teaching and intellectual tool, her explicit valuing of dialogue (the question-and-answer format), her explorations in teaching, and her advice for contemporary pedagogy (especially a multicultural pedagogy) are strikingly similar to views expressed by African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Barbara Christian, Elsa Barkley Brown, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker.

Audience, Teaching, and Authority

Hooks' frequent references to audience, both explicit and implicit, illustrate a major theme in her interview. When she admits that the audience made her a writer—"Absolutely"—she stresses the importance of concrete feedback in her development as a black woman writer. When she talks about the implied mutuality between reader and writer, her need as an isolated writer to have a clear sense of audience, she goes straight to the gut of the experience of most novice or inexperienced writers: knowing that we have something to say is essential to clear writing, but knowing that there are interested readers is a crucial element in developing a voice. This aspect about writing is really important, hooks tells us, "for marginalized people who haven't had voice but who are trying to come to grips with a voice." Hooks' focus on the importance of audience strengthens my interest in the subject of audience as a priority in my teaching. How do I as a teacher of writing and literature create substantial time in my class assignments for real feedback from real audiences for my students?
Despite this strong focus on concreteness, hooks knows—from experience—that “thinking too much about audience can be dangerous.” Obviously, one of the gauges here is to determine how much the sense of audience liberates/validates or silences/censors the writer’s voice. Another gauge seems to be linked to the writer’s own agenda. Hooks aims to create a critical readership. She wants to create some “magic” (I like her word choice) with her readers. In addition, she wants cohesion between ideas and “lived reality.” Her interest reminds me of what other African American women writers express in their work. But to specifically address the rhetoric and composition community, hooks’ views support a new dimension to our growing sense of schooling and its relationship to “lived reality.” The Western tradition of schooling and literacy, with its implicit schemes of hierarchical and either/or thinking, often serves to separate and alienate marginalized students from the roots of their “lived reality.” Related to this observation about marginalization is hooks’ criticism of white lesbian feminists and feminist agendas. As a woman of color, she observes that these feminist communities continue to be seduced by hierarchical thinking, privileging, and power relations that are implicit in Western patriarchal conceptions of schooling and literacy. Her criticisms are consistent with her interest in bridging theory and practice and in enlarging a critical readership of feminism that must include the growing numbers of illiterate women who are often poor and women of color.

Hooks’ conception of audience is not only an abstract, rationalized, or theoretical construction; it is also experienced and felt. Perhaps, more importantly, her concrete sense of audience and feedback is empowering, not only for herself but also for her readers.

Thus, when hooks compares her personal strategies for lecturing with her strategies for teaching, her thoughts, feelings, and experiences about audience contribute to her articulate sense of teacher-student relationships in general and multicultural pedagogies in particular. Teaching, like her lecturing, must be situational; it must not be formulaic. It should also exploit the “question-and-answer” period to incorporate differing agendas or an additional range of inquiry in the classroom. Encouraging such teaching practices, hooks, like other African American feminists, poses a challenging call for change in our conception of literacy and its pedagogy.

In her struggle to create change in her teaching strategies, hooks’ references to chaos—a key term, I think—and eros are two largely unexplored subjects for thinking about transitions from a Western, traditional pedagogy to a multicultural pedagogy (although hooks’ interest in eros certainly reminds me of Audre Lorde’s well-known essay, “Uses of the Erotic, the Erotic as Power”). Transforming our classrooms, venturing into new pedagogical territory, involves strong feelings of vulnerability, a willingness to take risks, and a confrontation with and unlearning of traditional formulaic thinking: “Am I covering the material?” For this kind of search, the chaos
seems inevitable. Among her many explorations that she shares, hooks articulates two distinctions that speak directly to my own experiences with students. Defining the personal in relation to teaching is useful to me, and distinguishing it from the act of personalizing is helpful to my thinking about teacher-student relationships. We see immediately that hooks' sense of the personal is audience-based (and activist); to personalize is not.

The second distinction that hooks makes between power and authority is especially timely for me. I've been reading Elsa Barkley Brown's "African-American Women's Quilting" with my students. Brown questions the use of white Western pedagogical strategies—those that are individualistic, competitive, linear, symmetrical, and that equate fairness with uniformity or sameness—to teach African American women's history, a history that is "polyrhythmic, nonsymmetrical, nonlinear, and noncompetitive regarding the individual and the community" (15). Brown describes her own role in the classroom. She decenters, and she "pivots the center." But readers may remain unclear about how Brown views her own authority in the classroom. Admittedly, she relinquishes most of it. Importantly, however, she describes the class as a scene of "chaos" in her efforts to construct a multicultural learning environment: "The structure I create is, by Western norms, a disorganized, chaotic, sporadic, and very unworkable class." But the class evolves so that chaos leads to learning and self-empowerment. Brown continues, "What in fact we get by the end of the semester is a serious improvisation ... in which people are empowered by their own authority and their right to expect things from others" (16-17). Hooks admits that her own venturing about issues of authority began with a total rejection of it and then led her to redefine her sense of power relations in the classroom. The central issue for hooks, Brown, and myself is shifting the classroom from an either/or, hierarchical paradigm to a "both/and," learning community paradigm, where, as hooks tells us, "no one acquires the kind of power to use the classroom as a space of domination." Although her sharing about experiences with chaos is helpful to me, I would have liked to have heard more from hooks in this interview about how the concept of eros enables her to construct these learning environments.

Multicultural Pedagogy and Language Use

As an African American woman and faculty member who teaches at a predominately white institution, I share similar experiences with hooks. I agree strongly with her views about the transition to a multicultural pedagogy. But I also note that she speaks from a position of privilege. For example, I read with envy that she handpicked the fourteen members of her seminar on Toni Morrison. Yet, it is clear that a commitment to learning environments that empower all members to work through "chaos, hostility, and tension" must include smaller classes in the curriculum. These are the environments out of which significant rereadings of literate culture create
powerful implications for future studies and future teacher-student rela-
tions. I am reminded, for example, of Toni Morrison, who dedicates her
provocative rereadings of American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* to her students at Princeton who were
members in an “academic environment, open and demanding.”

In addition to pedagogical issues, hooks addresses two significant ques-
tions about language. First, she talks about “language as a place of struggle”
and “writing that plays with language.” Her expression about this issue in
*Yearning* is beautiful and poetic. Yet, in this interview she connects her
interests to the activity of French feminists. I wanted to hear her link this
issue to the uses of the African American oral tradition in writing by black
authors, a tradition that is well-known for its complexity of codes and playful
representations in oral and written language. I was reminded of classic texts
such as Zora Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” or Paule
Marshall’s “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” or Toni Morrison’s “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.”

Hooks is admittedly brief in her response to the second question about
language—the one about “white supremacist manifestations in language.”
Perhaps some familiar issues come to mind immediately, such as the conno-
tations of *black* as negative, bad, or evil, and the connotations of *white* as
positive or good. Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* is a good reference for this
issue. Also, in a discussion on black power, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote
that in “Roget’s Thesaurus there are some 120 synonyms for ‘blackness’ and
at least 60 of them are offensive—such words as ‘blot,’ ‘soot,’ ‘grime,’ ‘devil’
and ‘foul’” (41). In contrast, King observed, “There are some 134 synonyms
for ‘whiteness’ and all are favorable, expressed in such words as ‘purity,’
‘cleanliness,’ ‘chastity’ and ‘innocence.’ A white lie is better than a black lie”
(41). He concluded his brief discussion of semantics with a reference to Ossie
Davis, who “suggested that maybe the English language should be ‘recon-
structed so that teachers will not be forced to teach the Negro child 60 ways
to despise himself and thereby perpetuate his false sense of inferiority and the
white child 134 ways to adore himself and thereby perpetuate his false sense
of superiority’” (41).

The issue of white supremacist manifestations in language use appears
in many of Toni Morrison’s recent publications, such as in her “Introduction:
Friday on the Potomac” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*. In addition,
during a videotaped interview with John Wideman, author of *Philadelphia Fire*, Morrison addresses questions about writing in a racialized society. She
notes that critics compare Wideman to Faulkner. One critic in particular
hails Wideman as “the black Faulkner, the soft cover Shakespeare” (empha-
sis added). Responding to this description, Morrison suggests to Wideman
that “you can’t ever have Faulkner, assuming one was living in the same time
(both of you writing at the same time) [referred to as], you know, the white
Wideman. It doesn’t quite work that way” (emphasis added). Working with
a recent issue that bell hooks addresses in *Black Looks*, I am currently writing an article, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance: Oral Tradition and Literacy in Hurston, Morrison, and Wideman," in which I critique the powerful gestures these three writers make in order to create blackness and the black voice in written language. These writers demonstrate black language not as inferior compared to standard or intellectual English, especially as historically documented. In these historical texts, for example, we find Edgar Allen Poe’s spelling of *nose* for the word *knows* in order to distinguish the voice of a black slave, or the court record of the Salem witch trials in the 1600s that records the voice of a black woman differently in order to mark her racial identity as inferior or infantile. Instead, these writers work to represent black language as irrevocably beautiful and, as Morrison describes it during the interview with Wideman, a sign of modernity. Despite the emotive force of hooks’ phrase, “loving blackness” does not mean that only black people do it (which reminds me of a former white male composition student in one of my classes who thought that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech was addressed to a black audience). Hooks’ introductory poem in *Black Looks* is especially eloquent about her audience and this issue.

This interview with bell hooks enables the rhetoric and composition community to broaden our range of listening so that we may explore the intersections between the varied, but familiar, arguments about literacy and the less familiar arguments that black women writers have voiced. As teachers and students become polyvocal and polyphonic, these explorations will enhance our understanding of literate processes, language use, and human relationships.

*University of Rochester*  
*Rochester, New York*

**Works Cited**


Literacy and Activism: A Response to bell hooks

Tom Fox

Most of the issues brought up in bell hooks’ interview with Gary Olson should resonate with readers of JAC. Issues of audience and power, the pedagogical challenges of multiculturalism, and the difficulties of developing constructive self-critiques are among the topics she raises that are routinely discussed in our journals and conferences. For these reasons, it’s not hard to understand why composition studies was one of the first disciplines to respond to hooks’ work.

Hooks’ scholarship has been important to me and my teaching for several reasons. Like Mike Rose in composition studies, she has sought an audience outside the academy and has conceived of her academic role broadly. She has not been confined by narrow disciplinary boundaries that not only limit audience but limit the voice that academics can have in public matters. For my students, this broadly defined sense of academic writing models one kind of writing that I hope they will strive for: critical, sensitive to audiences and their responses, historically minded and informed, and committed to public intervention. In the spirit of the self-contained short pieces that hooks refers to in the interview, I’d like to concentrate on five discussions that, for me, embody the issues that seem most important to my classrooms and those of my colleagues.

Writing, Audience, and Race

In the interview, hooks comments, “I think I now see myself more as a writer because it has become so evident that I have an audience, because I now get so much feedback. . . . [F]or me writing as a writer implied mutuality.” She goes on to say that “thinking about audience can be crucial for marginalized people who haven’t had [a] voice but who are trying to come to grips with a