bell hooks and the Politics of Literacy: A Conversation

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Feminist and cultural critic bell hooks is resolutely committed to promoting literacy. For hooks, literacy is essential to the future of the feminist movement because the lack of reading, writing, and critical skills serves to exclude many women and men from feminist consciousness. Yet, as hooks argues in the interview that follows, “The class standpoint of much feminist theory leads to a deprivileging of and a disrespect for the politics of reading and writing.” She makes a cogent case for encouraging “every feminist thinker in the academy” to acknowledge literacy to be “an important feminist agenda,” and she expresses “anguish” over the neglect of literacy among feminists: “If we truly want to empower women and men to engage in feminist thinking, we must empower them to read and write, but I really don’t see any large group of committed feminists making that a central agenda.”

This concern that mainstream feminist theorists have not promoted literacy is in keeping with hooks’ oft-repeated charge that White, liberal, middle-class feminists have traditionally set an agenda for feminism that fails to reflect the concerns of feminists who are also women (or men) of color. Since illiteracy is often a concern of the poor and underprivileged, many of whom often are minorities, this issue frequently is not perceived to be a feminist concern by “a lot of privileged women who already read and write, who don’t encounter anybody in their life who doesn’t read or write, and who therefore don’t even think about literacy.”

This commitment to critical literacy has made hooks a long-time supporter of Paulo Freire: “I was like a person dying of thirst when I first came to Paulo.” And despite the fact that many feminists (including hooks herself) have criticized Freire for being “partially blinded by sexism,” hooks feels justified in overlooking these imperfections in order to “take what was nurturing” from his work. Freire’s concept of critical consciousness has been particularly important to hooks’ own work and not only has strengthened her belief that literacy is necessary to the feminist movement but is apparently one reason why she has chosen to focus her scholarship on feminist theory and cultural criticism rather than literary criticism: “Literary criticism doesn’t participate as much as I would like it to in creating a critical readership, in educating people for critical consciousness.”
Like Freire, hooks promotes a notion of praxis that integrates reflection and action. Thus, she consistently incorporates anecdotes and details of her personal life into her writing in order to illuminate theory: “When you tell a story about how you use an abstract idea or a bit of theory in a concrete situation, it just feels more real to people.” This is precisely why, hooks argues, cultural criticism is so exciting: it makes students think, “Wow! there really is something to theory and to thinking about this stuff that I can translate back to my lived reality.” In fact, hooks believes that cultural criticism should be an important part of composition pedagogy because engaging in written cultural critique helps student writers become “more deeply engaged in composition.”

Undoubtedly, hooks has thought long and deeply about the problems and politics of pedagogy. She argues that preoccupation with audience during the composing process can be “dangerous” because it can lead to self-censorship, but she also believes that a sense of audience can help writers, especially “marginalized people,” develop an authentic voice. In addition, she espouses a pedagogy that is not formulaic but that is responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students. Such a situational pedagogy is especially appropriate for the multicultural classroom, but the transition to a multicultural pedagogy, hooks cautions, is fraught with chaos, and most teachers will need to develop “strategies for dealing with confusion and chaos.” Despite the new interventions in curriculum and modes of teaching that have “the power to re-center both composition and the writing process in pedagogy,” hooks fears that the conservative backlash may endanger such progressive reforms.

In discussing other issues of concern to compositionists, hooks encourages us to help students become polyvocal, to “talk about how white supremacy is manifested in the way we use language,” and to make space in the classroom for “intimacy or passion and desire.” She also speaks of the need for feminists to return to the notion of sisterhood, solidarity, but she is very concerned about certain strands of white lesbian feminist theory that seem to me to be coming out as a kind of policing of other marginal people, especially people of color.”

Clearly, bell hooks’ commitment to literacy, composition, critical consciousness, and cultural critique makes her an important ally to those of us involved in literacy studies and composition theory. As composition studies increasingly embraces cultural criticism, her work will become even more relevant to our own. Her insistence on turning her critique occasionally even to those who espouse progressive agendas (including certain white feminists, radical pedagogy theorists, and black literary critics) is indicative of her rigor and integrity as a cultural critic always wary of the systems of domination to which we all are so susceptible.¹
Q. You wrote your first book, *Ain't I Woman*, at nineteen when you were an undergraduate at Stanford. In *Talking Back* you write, “Although I have wanted writing to be my life-work since childhood, it has been difficult for me to claim ‘writer’ as part of that which identifies and shapes my everyday reality. Even after publishing books, I would often speak of wanting to be a writer as though these works did not exist.” Do you now see yourself as a writer, an author?

A. I do. 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. I found it hard to think of myself as a writer when I felt I was writing in isolation with no clear sense of an audience because for me writing as a writer implied mutuality, that there is both reader and writer.

Q. So the audience made you a writer.

A. Absolutely. I feel that really strongly. Each year of my life, I feel I’m writing with a deeper dedication because it’s so clear that the audience grows stronger.

Q. What’s your writing process like? Do you plan your works extensively before you begin to write? Do you revise heavily? Use a computer?

A. Well, one dreary thing that I do is handwrite everything; I’ve handwritten all my books. I like to handwrite because I find that I think differently when I do so. Computers are seductive in that you feel that you don’t have to edit and rework as much because the printed text can look so good, and if you have a good printer it looks even better. So for me the stages tend to be that I work something through in my head, and then I start writing it. And I work a lot with question outlines because the question-and-answer format is one I like a lot and use often in writing essays. I think: “What kind of questions do I envision myself and another audience wanting to know, say, about this film or about this issue?”

Q. In your books you experiment with various alternatives to traditional academic prose, including interviews, self-interviews, and dialogues. Do you see such forms as ways to resist traditional, patriarchal discourse, or do you have other reasons for using such forms?

A. Oh, absolutely! I think one of the primary reasons for using these forms is a lesson I learned from the Shahrazad Ali book. When I saw all those poor underclass and lower-middle class people on the subways of New York and in bus stations reading that book, I wondered, “What’s so magical about this book? It’s not just the content.” What I realized was that you could open that book to any page, and any paragraph would make sense; it shared an idea with you. And I realized that conversation books are like that. One of the things I’ve been thinking a lot about is that I find that lately I read less. I used to pride myself on reading a book a day, because reading was a passion for me. But now I’m lucky if I read a book a week. In busy times I’m lucky if I read a book in two weeks. I wondered how we expect people who work every day to come home and read these
ten- and twenty-page essays we are taught to write in the academy. And so I learned from Shahrazad Ali that you can write a kind of book like *Breaking Bread* (which is the conversational book) in which people can come home and open it up to any page and read that page and feel that they got some idea and that they understood it, that they could digest it. Then I got a lot of feedback from readers who said, "I found I could come home from work, open up *Breaking Bread*, and just read maybe a couple of pages." This is a real challenge to us as academics who have been trained to write longer pieces, and I see it as a subversion of the whole sense that there has to be only one monolithic writing style that can be given scholarly legitimation in the academy. Sometimes I write ten pages of something and I think this could have just as well been said in three pages, but most journals aren't going to want to publish three pages. I'd like to see journals become more open to publishing smaller pieces if we can truly say what we have to say in that short space.

Q. In a recent *JAC* interview, Jane Tompkins discusses the need to personalize academic writing, and in *Talking Back* you mention your own attempts to introduce the personal into your writing. In what way is the personal potentially an important component of scholarly writing?

A. If you look at my first two books, you see very little personal anecdote, personal confession. What I began to find was that when you're trying to invite people to shift their paradigms more pragmatically or concretely—for example, I'm trying to get black people to think about feminism and often there's resistance—usually if you just start off from the purely theoretical or the abstract (and I don't think theory and abstraction are one and the same), people don't tend to open up if they already have that resistance. We had a good example of it in a talk I gave today. A young black brother said, "I came here not knowing your work, assuming that you were anti-black-male." If I had not told the kinds of anecdotes that showed my regard for black males, my concern for their well being, I don't think he would have opened up. This is something that has made me think a lot—about the personal story as a teaching tool. I gave a lecture recently at the MMLA, and I talked about my concern about everything being personalized. Someone stood up in the question-and-answer period and said that he was sorry to hear me say this because so much of my work has been personal. I replied, "I don't think of *personal* and *personalize* as the same thing. For me, *personalize* means that you see everything as coming back to your ego and to your narcissistic construction of self." I said that I saw my willingness to be more confessional about my life and to share experiences as part of a kind of activism that is about sacrifice for me. I also said that I'd like to spend a year of my life when maybe I wasn't sharing in a public arena details of my personal life, but I have found those details often to be what grabs people, and it's what makes theory seem (as it does for me) to have concrete application. When you tell a story about how you use an
abstract idea or a bit of theory in a concrete situation, it just feels more real to people.

Q. In *Talking Back*, you write, "To make the liberated voice, one must confront the issue of audience—we must know to whom we speak. . . . 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." Do you believe writers should "ignore" audience, that awareness of audience can be a *disabling* concern, or do you think writers should develop an ever sharper sense of audience?

A. We need to do both. I've just finished writing a piece on censorship. I was struck by the fact that I was very disturbed by Henry Louis Gates' Op-Ed piece on anti-semitism in the *New York Times*, and I wanted to write a response, but I felt that I shouldn't, that it was inappropriate, that I would be perceived as attacking a black man, and so I thought to myself that I shouldn't write this piece. I thought about other academics who would say I'm trashing Skip, and I was worried that Skip would see me as not supporting him. That's the kind of case where too much recognition of audience can be dangerous. This is a very dangerous phenomenon in academe right now. When intellectuals constitute a rising social class—and I think we see a rising sort of clique in a sense with some black intellectuals—then there's a kind of censorship that says, "Well, maybe I should go out and have a drink with this person and tell him what I don't like about his essay, but I shouldn't write a public response." I really grappled with this question. I said, "My God, if I who have tenure and a clear sense of where I'm going feel that I can't write a critique for fear of how other people might respond, then what must someone who has no job security, who has to fear that this powerful black male academic might have a say in their future, feel? It stunned me just how dangerous that kind of climate is. In that sense, thinking too much about audience can be dangerous. Yet, thinking about audience can be crucial for marginalized people who haven't had voice but who are trying to come to grips with a voice. In a sense, when I was eighteen and nineteen and was writing the first draft of *Ain't I A Woman*, I had a very artificial academic voice. *Ain't I A Woman* didn't get published until six years or so after I wrote it, and it initially had a lot of stilted language. When I began to imagine myself speaking to other black women, I was able to break out of the jargon that I had learned as the appropriate academic tone. I think that was a way in which thinking of audience was positive and constructive. Sometimes it's good to think about the audience you want to reach because we can reach different audiences in different ways.

Q. One audience you have *not* catered to is the traditional literary-critical establishment. In *Breaking Bread* you say, "I have never focused on publishing my literary criticism to the degree that I have feminist theory
or cultural criticism, or even film criticism.” What accounts for this decision? Do you believe literary criticism is generally responsive to African-American concerns?

A. We've seen a great welling up of literary criticism about African-American texts. To me, an interesting question is to what extent does literary criticism help create a critical readership? Part of what has made me distance myself from writing literary criticism as much as I write other things is that literary criticism doesn't participate as much as I would like it to in creating a critical readership, in educating people for critical consciousness. That may have had more to do with the type of literary criticism we've been writing, but I have not nurtured that aspect of my intellectuality as much because of the fact that so few people read it. Once you have a book that five-thousand people have read (which doesn't seem like a lot, but for academics that's a lot of readers), to think that you will labor over an essay that only ten people might read is really hard. What's great is when we have the luxury of the option to do both. I would never feel happy just to have that limited readership; at the same time, it's also okay when people want to write something that may only be magic for a small audience. I don't want to denigrate that. I think we can have both. It was interesting that at the end of a public lecture I gave today, quite a number of people came up to say that they had, in fact, read the lit-crit articles I've done on Hurston and Walker and which were published in more obscure places and don't have much accessibility. This showed me that people do read those things, but rarely do people write to me about those pieces. It's the whole question of to what extent people feel they can use critical work, critical thinking, in their lives. And I think that cultural criticism seems to excite so many of us right now precisely because it seems to make students think, “Wow! there really is something to theory and to thinking about this stuff that I can translate back to my lived reality.” Once you're seduced by the potentiality of a larger audience and a larger critical dialogue, I think it's hard to engage in certain forms of writing that close down the possibility of larger audiences.

Q. You claim in Breaking Bread that “when I look at the evolution of my identity as a writer I see it intimately tied to my spiritual evolution.” Would you elaborate on this connection?

A. I believe I was thinking about the question of contemplation. A lot of people ask me, “How do you write all these books?” I used to joke, “Oh, it's because I don't have a life.” But I think the real answer is that I spend a lot of time alone, and I believe that the act of writing isn't just about spending the time alone writing; it's also the time you spend in contemplation. My development as an intellectual and as a critical thinker is tied to spirituality because growing up as a working-class black woman, the only arena of my life that gave me the sense that I had the right to a space of contemplation was religiosity and spirituality. In fact, it was telling me
that everybody needs to go into the desert and to be alone. Given the kind of racist, sexist iconography in our culture that always presumes that black women should serve the interests of others, whether it's black children or black men or the larger society, it's very hard for black women to claim that space that is the precursor to writing, the space where you can think through ideas. This is a way in which those two experiences of spiritual practice and writing converge for me. Also, I'm really engaged with Buddhism. I just did a big interview in Tricycle, a marvelous, new Buddhist magazine that covers various cultural issues and tries to relate Buddhist practice in the United States to other aspects of our culture. One of the things I like about Buddhism is its emphasis on practice; when I apply that to writing, writing becomes a form of practice that gives me the energy to spend long hours. I just finished a long piece on Jean-Michel Basquiat, the twenty-seven year-old black painter who has a retrospective at the Whitney right now. I meditated a great deal because I felt that there was kind of a white supremacist art hegemony that was writing very negative cultural criticism about his work and art criticism. I felt that I really wanted to be able to write something that would illuminate the beauty and power I find in his work. I thought about it, I read a lot of things, and then all of a sudden after months and months that "rush" came. I sat for hours at the computer—I mean serious, say, ten-hour periods. I have evolved into someone who sits in meditation and who values that kind of immersion. When I finished this piece, I felt ecstasy, the ecstasy of being able to make an intervention. I felt that the piece had a lot of power. I called it "Altars of Sacrifice: Remembering Basquiat," alluding to a black church song: "You're all on the altar of sacrifice laid." Again, it's that convergence for me of motifs of spirituality and cultural criticism.

Q. You've often made the point that the margin can be a site of opportunity as well as oppression. Despite the rapid growth of rhetoric and composition as a discipline, it continues to be marginalized within the university. Do you see any advantage in composition's marginalized status? How would you go about exploiting this advantage?

A. Well, I think that those professors who have been most willing to engage cultural criticism and other ways of de-centering the West in writing are finding that their students are more deeply engaged in composition. One of the first areas of my work that I got positive feedback on was from teachers of composition who said, "When my students read Talking Back, it really helps them think about having a voice." That was the last thing I thought about when I was writing Talking Back. I don't think it ever occurred to me that these essays could have power in the composition classroom, opening students up in some ways, because those essays address a lot of the deep fears people have about voice and the act of writing. So, I think that if we really examine the kind of composition work that has done that, I think we would see a new and renewing dimension
both to composition and to the art of writing. That's why we're in danger right now with the backlash against those new interventions in curriculum and modes of teaching; those interventions have the power to re-center both composition and the writing process in pedagogy, and it will be a tragedy for us if they get taken out in the interest of people going back to the way it was.

Q. You've pointed out that in a multicultural classroom it's necessary to be aware of the diversity of cultural codes so as to create an inclusive atmosphere. What specific steps can we take to create an effective multicultural pedagogy?

A. The movement toward a multicultural pedagogy was really, to me, tantamount to a revolution; and, like revolutions on all levels in culture, there are times of chaos. Many of us thought we'd make this transition without chaos, and I think partially most of us develop pedagogical practices that don't in any way include strategies for dealing with confusion and chaos. One of the things I said yesterday in talking to an audience at Tufts University was that I find the greater the level of diversity in my classes from a race, ethnicity, gender, sexual-practice standpoint, the harder it is to construct a learning community. It takes longer to create an environment in which people can hold all the differences and allow for harmony and dissent at the same time, and I think that's a challenge to us because when we've had a kind of banking system of education, as Freire says, or a system that focuses so much on quantity ("How much did you get done?") it becomes harder because the process is slower. I've found in my own teaching experience that the smaller the class, the better. My Toni Morrison seminar has fourteen students in it, and I got to choose those students from a list of fifty after I interviewed them. So the class is diverse: it's ethnically diverse, it has diverse sexual practices, it has tremendous difference. But because we are small, we are able to work through the tensions that those differences create. For example, the other day I was talking about how I felt deeply disturbed by Morrison's eroticization of the scar on Sethe's back in Beloved. One of the more traditional, white English majors said, "When I first read Morrison in a traditional English class where we didn't even talk about scars and slavery and woundedness, I just wrote about the imagery of trees in Morrison." This created one of those little moments of uproar and tension and dissent, but we were able to use it as a learning moment. When things like that happen in my course of forty students, they rarely become learning moments in that instant because so much chaos, hostility, or tension arises. So, I think that's a major challenge to us. In what ways does the classroom itself have to change in order to be more conducive to a multicultural perspective? I don't think the classroom can remain the same; I don't think the professor's place in the classroom can remain the same, because there are so many areas in which we have gaps in our own knowing. And where is the space
in our pedagogical practice to admit, "I can't really be the primary teacher at this moment because I don't know enough"?

Q. But in their attempts to initiate students into the discursive practices of dominant culture, compositionists face a real dilemma. On the one hand, they want to empower students by giving them the tools of traditional literacy in order to help them compete successfully in the world, but, on the other hand, doing so is often asking students from non-privileged backgrounds to reject their own cultural identities and discourses. How can we empower students while preserving cultural difference?

A. One major way is that we can encourage students to be polyvocal and polyphonic, that we don't say, "You've got to give this up to acquire that." You say, "Keep what you've got." For a year when I was teaching at Yale, students had a choice: they could do a paper in black vernacular, in Spanish, in whatever they wanted to, as long as they did that same paper in standard English and followed the required format. I would say to my students, "I would be disempowering you if I did not encourage you to acquire the ways of knowing and the forms of writing that will help you succeed in society as a whole; but to honor and cherish those other ways of speaking and writing, we can do things simultaneously so that you can acquire all of these skills and not be forced to leave the other behind." I feel that a lot of people don't progress in writing because it's actually a deeper psychological issue of language. I just wrote a piece a few months ago for an anthology on language in which I talk about what happens when you feel most familiar in a particular language, patois, or vernacular that isn't affirmed in writing classes, and how diminishing that can be psychologically and how it can turn you off from a process that you don't have to be turned off from if you can find a way to simultaneously hold that language. Once I asked my students in a huge class on black women writers, "Why do we only hear English in this classroom? There are some people here for whom English is not their first language, but they never get carried away and say a sentence in Spanish." A student said, "But if they did, we wouldn't understand them." I answered, "But they're capable of translating; plus, what does it mean for us to learn in a context where we would hear something other than English? Even if we didn't understand a statement, it would remind us of the multicultural nature of our society; it would remind us of the multilingual nature of our society; it might encourage many of us to become bilingual rather than to speak only English; but, also, we can then privilege the translation of the student's statement." I used to have students whose first language was Spanish say, "It's hard for me to do my paragraphs because when I really think passionately, it comes out in Spanish." So I recommend that they write in Spanish and then translate. It's interesting how dualistic thinking operates on so many levels. Why do these students immediately imagine, "I must give up that Spanish," or "It's a negation; I can't express it in
English”? I ask, “Do you have some problems translating?” “Oh, that never occurred to me.” It’s such a simple strategy, but when we think dualistically all the time, that strategy doesn’t come forth.

Q. You say in Yearning that when “white critics write about black culture ‘cause it’s the ‘in’ subject without interrogating their work to see whether or not it helps perpetuate and maintain racist domination, they participate in the commodification of ‘blackness’ that is so peculiar to postmodern strategies of colonization.” How can white instructors avoid the “commodification” of racial identity while attempting to develop a culturally inclusive curriculum?

A. Well, there again I think that asking questions is really useful. I often do self-interviews. I keep a journal, and I write in it every day to try to get a handle on why I’m doing something or what I hope to accomplish by doing it. Asking such hard questions of ourselves usually compels us to hone our perspective. And I think, too, that when white people ask themselves those hard questions, then they’re not pissed off or terrified when a person of color confronts them because they’ve already dealt with that.

Q. In “Representing Whiteness” you cite Coco Fusco’s remark, “To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other.” Can you think of ways that interrogation of whiteness can inform pedagogy, especially composition pedagogy?

A. That’s an interesting question that I haven’t really explored fully. I wonder to what extent we could talk about how white supremacy is manifested in the way we use language. I could see myself teaching a composition class. I work a lot in my courses with the paragraph out of the old-school conviction that if people can write a deep and compelling paragraph, they can usually go on to write a deep and compelling paper. So people in my classes do a lot of paragraphs. I could easily see myself having students write a paragraph about a text or something and saying, “Let’s look at this to analyze how this paragraph might be written in such a way as to reaffirm the primacy of whiteness. Does that happen in the manner in which we write, not just in what we say?” That’s one way that comes to me immediately, but I haven’t really thought about this subject deeply.

Q. You’ve argued that “To make a revolutionary feminist pedagogy, we must relinquish our ties to traditional ways of teaching that reinforce domination. This is very difficult. . . . We must first focus on the teacher-student relationship and the issue of power. How do we as feminist teachers use power in a way that is not coercive, dominating?” What is an appropriate use of authority in the classroom?

A. This issue is really interesting. First, I think it’s important for us to distinguish authority from power because authority does not necessarily imply a positionality that can lead to dominance, whereas when we’re dealing with questions of power we are talking about how we occupy the
space of authority in a way that can reinforce and perpetuate domination. This became clear to me when I read Diana Fuss' book on essentialism. I wrote a critique of that book precisely because I felt that when she critiqued the notion that students are using the politics of experience, identity politics, to assert power over other students in the classroom and to assert a kind of hegemony of experience, I was struck by how so much of the language she used to describe the professor was that of hierarchy, authority, and power. It seems to me that what I have struggled with is that I initially went into this whole question of pedagogy and power not wanting to acknowledge my position of authority, the position that is a power relation that distinguishes me from the students in that I am grading them. I wanted to throw out the idea that there is an authority here, and, of course, that was nonsense. Now what I try to do is to allow myself to acknowledge my authority and the limitations of it and to then think about how we can learn together in a way that no one acquires the kind of power to use the classroom as a space of domination. I think that's one of the things that we have to think about in the diverse classroom, in the multicultural classroom. I think what positively Diana Fuss was trying to say is that it's possible in this diverse context, around these issues of race and gender and sexual practice, for everyone to engage in power struggles and, in fact, for certain students to have potentially the power to coerce, dominate, and silence. What I found sad was that her strategy for dealing with that was to reinforce the authority of the professor as opposed to thinking about what are the ways that we can teach so that students question, "How can I respect your difference, your difference of opinion, without crushing you?" That's a very different sense of power relations. I just finished a piece called "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process" in which I talk about the place of desire and love in the classroom because my students often express great passion for me in their writing, in their journal writings, and I often feel great passion for them. It's an interesting issue since the increased emphasis on sexual harassment has made many of us fear any kind of intimacy or passion and desire in the classroom because it raises these questions of power. We see that, for example, in the recent Exeter Academy case where, when it really comes right down to it, we don't have a lot of proof that the professor who turned out to be gay abused any student. They do know that he liked pornography and pornography with boys in it, but the point is that people immediately felt there had been abuse of power because people think that anytime desire is present people will act on desire. So, what I was trying to think about in this piece was to work through a notion of how we might use the place of passion in the classroom to diffuse hierarchy and to create a sense of community. Students would actually come up to me and whine, "There's a way that you hug this student or talk to that student, and I want you to look at me the way you look at Johnny." I kept hearing this sort of sense
of diminishing returns that if I have a lot of energy for one student I can’t have any energy for others. I said, “Why is it that none of you think that if I look at Johnny this way, I must be willing to look at you this way, too—that it’s not like I have this little space of care in me as a teacher and it’s doled out for those special students? Why can’t you think that I have this space of care that can enlarge to include everyone?” That was a real challenge for them because, again, we were seeing how either/or thinking, hierarchical thinking, was at work: if I really have passion for one student, I can’t have passion for another. How can there be passion when students are different?

Q. In Talking Back you discuss “the transformative power of teaching, of pedagogy” that you witnessed as a student in segregated black schools: “In particular, those teachers who approached their work as though it was indeed a pedagogy, a science of teaching, requiring diverse strategies, approaches, explorations, experimentation, and risks, demonstrated the value—the political power—of teaching.” What do you see as necessary elements of an effective liberatory pedagogy?

A. I’ve found that we can’t have formulaic teaching and we can’t have formulaic syllabi, that you have to go into a situation willing to think about what the needs of the people in this situation are. That’s very hard, given the way we’ve been trained. I begin every semester with my syllabi intact and with my strategies in my head, and I think we have to do that because we work within structures. But what does it mean when we have to pull back and try a different strategy? As a person on the lecture circuit, I used to just bring the lecture that I had been told to give, but there were times when I would have an audience that really wasn’t open to what I had planned to talk about. Then I thought there’s no law that says I can’t bring two or three lectures and once I get a sense of who the audience is going to be, of how I feel about them, that I could give the lecture most immediate for those circumstances. Teaching has to be that same way because it always then brings us back to a notion of a subject, a subject encounter. I’m not just imposing onto you a structure I’ve predesigned; I’m thinking about what this structure will mean to you. Yesterday, for example, I went to Tufts prepared to give a talk that focused mainly on representations of black women. I talked to professors there who said, “We’re having such a struggle around cultural diversity. If you have this other lecture, that would be really great.” But then I had dinner with students and talked with a lot of them. When I came to the lecture, I sensed that the students really wanted me to talk about black women. I felt I would lose a whole dimension of listening if I switched the topic, especially because the other lecture started with my relationship to a white male. I thought that the students were quite needy (they’d just heard about Audre Lorde’s death), and they very much wanted black femaleness to be at the center. And I have to say that the other lecture’s more interesting to me
because it's raising issues about the academy that are on my mind in a way that a lot of the representation material is old for me, but I made that decision, and I felt it was the wise decision, and then I used the question-and-answer period as a space where I could bring up some of the ideas from the other piece. I think the classroom situation has to function much more like that then we want it to. I came to my Toni Morrison seminar two weeks ago, and it seemed that everybody was sleepy. I didn't feel good. We get a lot of intensely cold grey days, and we are in these hot, hot rooms. When I came to class, several people said, “You know, I really feel that I don't have a lot to give today.” So what I said was, “Well, what are some of the ways we might talk about Beloved today that might allow us to have not our usual two-and-a-half-hour period but maybe let’s just take an hour and a half but to think about how we can be really passionate about that?” So we tossed around and found our ideas. But that is very difficult. I still think, “Are we covering the material? They want to come over to my house for an extra class. Damn, I'm so busy that I don't want to meet with these kids for an extra class.” I always think it's the mark of exciting pedagogy when students demand to have extra classes. But as I get older and more busy, I get less interested in those extra classes. That also has always struck me as a potential dimension of teaching that is inspired teaching. I do a lot of lunch meetings with my students where we all bring lunch; we have class but we all eat together. I have a theory that people feel a certain kind of vulnerability while they're eating, that certain things fall away, and so we often move and have class in a different setting; this may bring us closer together as a learning community because people drop their guard in certain ways.

Q. You've mentioned that Paulo Freire has had “a profound liberatory effect on my thinking,” and in Breaking Bread you call him “one of my major mentors.” Yet, in Feminist Theory, you point out that Freire's work is partially blinded by sexism. How seriously compromised is Freire's work by sexism?

A. The degree to which it is compromised is overdetermined by the location that one brings to his teaching. When he and I were together discussing this last summer at a conference, I said that I was like a person dying of thirst when I first came to Paulo, and the fact that there was some mud in my water was not important. I thought of his sexism as being like specks of dirt or mud because my need was so great. I was able to take what was nurturing to me and be more compassionate toward the aspect that was threatening, whereas I think many white feminists coming from different locations (not locations of need in the same way, perhaps) felt much more that they couldn't get to those nurturing aspects of the work because of that negative or tarnished dimension. One of the reasons it helps us to think about different positionalities is that perhaps then they could have been more compassionate toward his work by thinking, “Just because the
sexism is a barrier to me, maybe there are some other people whose needs are such that it is not the same barrier.” I think that it’s also dangerous because Paulo has shown himself willing to engage in dialogue about this and is willing to grow. Also, there are limits given his lifetime, where he is now, where he’s going, and there are different cultural codes, too. When I did the presentation with Paulo last summer, I had a new boyfriend who came to see me in my academic milieu. All these feminists were there, and Paulo started to introduce me by saying, “Dis is a beautiful woman, one no man can forget.” I could just see the feminist (mainly white feminist) women in the room shrinking, whereas I think as a woman of color, coming from a different cultural code, I felt totally amused. I felt as if he were my granddad. I recognized it as sexism; I would have preferred a different kind of introduction, maybe one that started with my intellectual brilliance (which he did go on to talk about), but, respecting his code, where he was coming from, I didn’t feel denigrated or diminished by what he was saying. But other people there felt that bell hooks is too forgiving of men; she’s not angry enough at men; she’s too patient. How do we walk that tightrope? Some black women said that to me the other day: “We like certain things about black male culture, but then we feel that maybe if we start tolerating this way of thinking about us or talking to us, it will go to far.” I think it’s difficult to create that balance.

Q. You’ve argued that “sisterhood” has been a destructive concept when used to erase differences between women. Yet, you’ve also argued that sisterhood can be a productive concept because “solidarity strengthens resistance struggle.” Do you believe sisterhood can be a viable concept for feminist movement in the 1990s? How should it be understood today?

A. If we are to continue our progressive movements for change and to welcome diversity and multiculturalism, solidarity has to become a more central agenda. For me sisterhood always has been a rubric for talking about feminist theoretical and practical construction of solidarity, and it seems to me that we need to return that discussion to our thinking. One thing that was troubling to people at MMLA was that I said I was very concerned about certain strands of white lesbian feminist theory that seem to me to be coming out as a kind of policing of other marginal people, especially people of color. I was thinking particularly about work that has been very negative toward the idea of experience, the use of experience. I'm thinking particularly of a book by Linda Singer published by Routledge. Singer had just died, and in the book's introduction Judith Butler is sharing something about her and says something like, “Linda would be totally unhappy for me to go into a confessional or experiential thing because that is precisely the kind of women's studies she hated.” I thought to myself, “Why do we have to engage in this privileging of one thing over another?” I tried to talk about the way in which lesbianism becomes the sign of transgression that then allows certain scholars to put forth analyses
that are reactionary along the lines of race but that are not immediately perceived as reactionary because they’re coming from what is already identified as a transgressive location. So I think if a straight white man were saying, “These people of color, these gay people, are using experience too much; they’re talking about it but not doing the hard theoretical analysis, and so on,” we would question that much more than when someone who occupies the cool space of transgression says it. Yet, I see this happening in a way that I think pits us against one another, yet again, and I think that’s something that’s really dangerous and that we have to look at.

Q. You make the point in *Ain’t I a Woman* that feminist rhetoric often deploys an analogy between “women” as an oppressed group and “blacks” and that this analogy “unwittingly” caused people to “suggest that to them the term ‘woman’ is synonymous with ‘white women’ and the term ‘black’ synonymous with ‘black men,’” thereby creating a “sexist-racist attitude toward black women.” Do you believe that feminist rhetoric has changed since you first wrote this?

A. That kind of piggybackson what I was just saying. What disturbs me about this new trend is that I do feel we have made major changes in feminist theory and that people were really working to be inclusive, to try to think from different positionalities, but it’s very easy for people to undermine those interventions that I do believe were made. Feminist rhetoric was changing. It disturbs me a lot that neither Susan Faludi’s book nor Naomi Wolf’s book shows any awareness of the push to think about differences of race, class, and gender. They both reconstruct the kind of monolithic category of woman even though Wolf has some analysis in the footnotes (that’s in *The Beauty Myth*) of differences for black women. I thought to myself, “Why does she put those differences in a footnote?” It’s because it then allows her to reinforce her thematic construction of woman as a model of the category: woman that responds to beauty in the same way. It also then allows for the reprivileging of experiences that are specific to certain classes of white women, and I think this trend is scary because it has the danger of undermining the profound changes in feminist thinking and feminist rhetoric that have come about.

Q. What do you think accounts for our inability to “think” the concepts of race and gender together?

A. One is the hostility of the old academic guard to that and the increasing scarcity of jobs within the academy in that no matter how transgressive our sexual practice or anything else, many of us are still having to have that older guard evaluate us. That’s one major factor that creates a barrier. Another is that many of us simply have not been trained. One thing about the kind of work I do and that I think the way I write belies is that I do a tremendous amount of reading across disciplines. (And I don’t have the thousand footnotes that some people do; some people footnote every-
thing, and the footnotes are just as long as the text. I don't tend to do that.) For example, for the piece that I just finished on Basquiat, I read enormous amounts of art criticism, but I also did reading in symbolic anthropology because I wanted to make some connections between what he's doing and the work of people like David Napier in his book *Foreign Bodies*, and I think that we haven't been trained to read that way. Let's face it, we all have time limitations, too. A lot of people just feel, "I can't do this because I can't really get all that background work that would allow me to do it." But rather than acknowledge that, why do we have people writing essays that say, "This essay will only speak from the position of black middle class dah-ti-dah because I didn't feel that I had the knowledge base to extend it," rather than announcing that as though it's okay?

Q. In "Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda," you argue that basic literacy is a necessary ingredient of continued growth of feminist movement, and you say that the lack of basic reading and writing skills excludes many women from feminist consciousness. Besides your recommendation for creating neighborhood literacy programs, how can we further integrate the goals of feminism and the spread of literacy?

A. We can't even begin to talk about that until every feminist thinker in the academy acknowledges literacy to be an important feminist agenda. Again, the class standpoint of much feminist theory leads to a deprivileging of and a disrespect for the politics of reading and writing, and this has become all the more rampant with the privileging of metalinguistic theory over other forms of theory, increasing the sense that it's a waste of time to think about reading and writing. That has been an ongoing cause of anguish to me because I do feel that if we truly want to empower women and men to engage in feminist thinking, we must empower them to read and write, but I really don't see any large group of committed feminists making that a central agenda. For example, look at how much energy women have brought to the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace just since the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas exchange on national television. If we brought that kind of energy to literacy, the results would be incredible. We would reap the benefits much more quickly than the benefits of trying to raise patriarchal consciousness about sexual harassment. Yet, who decides that sexual harassment is more central than the question of literacy? A lot of privileged women who already read and write, who don't encounter anybody in their life who doesn't read or write, and who therefore don't even think about literacy. They don't even consider that as great a matter as sexual harassment in the workplace is, it's possibly not as great as the growing illiteracy among women, particularly poor women, many of whom in our society are women of color. We don't even say we are setting agendas here for public policy. We weren't saying to Bill Clinton or any of our candidates during the presidential election that literacy is a big issue. A lot of black men and other groups of men who
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are unemployed are in part unemployed because many of them can't read or write. Even if there is some job available that they might do, they're out of luck if it requires a skill that they don't have. Even the process of voting in this culture necessitates literacy. My class and I did a whole discussion on literacy and voting and how you could enter some space and say, "Look, I can't vote this way because I don't read. The ballots were so overly wordy, so overly packed, it was frightening."

Q. You write in Yearning, "Language is also a place of struggle. We are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle." Your language in this passage is suggestive of writing experiments carried on by various French feminists. Do you feel any affinity with French feminists such as Luce Irigaray despite the obvious cultural differences?

A. I feel both affinity and sometimes jealousy because sometimes a lot of regular scholars will read my language as a place of struggle and make fun of it, as I think my ex-colleague at Yale, Sara Suleri, did; yet, they will privilege that writing when it's done by French theorists: writing that plays with language, writing that isn't complete sentences, writing that seems to be convoluted but disjointed thoughts. I find that interesting because I do feel those affinities, but I sometimes feel, "Wouldn't it be nice if I could write a little book like this?" I also feel that I learn a great deal from French feminist thought. I don't evoke it much because of the way it has been privileged to be dismissive of a lot of what goes on in that form of feminist theory-making in this society that wants to be more engaged in theory and practice. I tend not to privilege it in my writing, though I do certainly read and study it.

Q. In Ain't I a Woman you say that "Malcolm X was the black Muslim leader that many people saw as an exemplary figure of black manhood, but it is impossible to read his autobiography without becoming aware of the hatred and contempt he felt toward women for much of his life." In light of the recently renewed interest in Malcolm X, are you concerned that this aspect of his identity will be glossed over?

A. Actually, I think just the opposite. I'm concerned that it will be affirmed that Malcolm was right when he told us that black men were experiencing these things because of black women, black women who were in cahoots with white men. I'm concerned that people will focus on that dimension of Malcolm's work and life and not the dimensions where he was beginning to rethink gender. Even though we have enough statements and docu-
ments to let us know that he was rethinking gender, he didn’t say enough of those things publicly with the force and the quantity with which he said misogynist things, and so people are much more likely to cling to that version. It’s up to feminist scholars to address this issue. I was just interviewed on Pacifica, and I said that I felt that it was the task of feminist thinkers not to allow Malcolm scholarship to be completely done by non-feminist male scholars, that we must take a role in calling attention to the ways he changed his thinking about gender by publicizing those quotes and hard facts. In a piece I wrote about going to the big Malcolm X conference a few years ago, I talked about my own fear of going to that conference, but I felt that I needed to get up and say that if we really take seriously the notion of “by any means necessary,” then we have to take seriously the notion that if giving up sexism is essential for the freedom and the liberation of black people, that’s one of those necessary means. (I was afraid to go to the conference because I was afraid that I wouldn’t be well received by the audience.) Feminist thinkers have to engage this image, this icon and his teachings, if we want to ensure that people recognize the evolutions he was making as a thinker. I deeply feel that he would have been the first major black male leader to wholeheartedly support gender equality and to condemn sexism.

Q. Over the years, your work has generated substantial criticism as well as praise. Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you’d like to address?

A. I would like to address why I don’t tend to write responses. One of the most recent trashings of my work was by Sara Suleri in an issue of Critical Inquiry. Lots of people said that one thing that disturbed them as readers was that she made a scathing critique based on my first two books and pulled out a lot of quotes, misquoting some of them. These people kept asking, “Why don’t you write a response?” I didn’t write a response because I felt that often women of color are set against one another by people in journals who think they’ll have a great journal issue if, for example, they publish a trashing of bell hooks and she responds. I usually tend to withdraw and think about writing something later, reformulating or questioning rather than responding directly. This is also a dimension of Buddhist practice, where rather than feeling that I have to engage in a battle with critics, I tend to think that I have to take on those ideas. For example, in the piece I’m writing on censorship, I talk about things people have said about me. I don’t keep confidences because often in my anecdotal sharings, I refer to things that come up in spaces that in the academy are seen as sacred or private. I talk about what I perceive my commitment to ideas to be, that they’re not about allegiance to specific people, and that they do have to do with a sense about truth and what it means to push yourself to say something even if you think it will alienate an individual. I try not to feel alienated from individuals because of their
critical trashings or constructive critiques of me because I think that's another dilemma of intellectuality in the academy than the personalizing of critiques so that you feel, "That person has shot me down; let me shoot him or her down." Instead, I try to flesh out the ideas and to think how I could write something that might address the issues. For example, consider the homophobic remarks made about me and my work in *Black Collegian*. I thought about what my response should be and decided to incorporate that whole discussion into the article on censorship because I felt that part of the aim of that review was to say to black people at black colleges that they should not read the works of bell hooks. So, I'm not trying to take that person on directly because I feel it's not the person; it's the ideas that he was cultivating, and I'd like to take those ideas on.

Another example was when I referred at the MMLA to "some strands of white lesbian feminism." People immediately stood up in droves and wanted to know who I was talking about. I said, "That's the whole point," and we had that whole discussion of personalizing. It isn't a matter of who I was talking about. The real issue was why we as marginal groups allow ourselves to be played off against one another, and I thought it was endemic to how we want to personalize everything. The people immediately wanted to know who I was talking about rather than wanting to deal with the idea I was referring to, which is why we allow this to happen, what mechanisms of power go on that allow one marginal group to receive favors from the dominant group by trashing other marginal groups, and what we have to do to avoid that. In working closely as colleagues with Third World women, many of whom come from different class backgrounds than myself, I find that we often have to have meetings about the ways our white colleagues try to pit us against one another. It seems to me that kind of effort to address ideas and standpoints and alliance is much more productive than focusing on personal responses. So I tend to shy away from them.

Notes

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