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NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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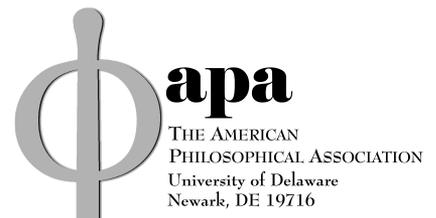
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Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

In this edition of the *Newsletter*, we give tribute to the work of bell hooks. This form of recognition is consistent with our understanding that philosophy *and* the Black experience are co-constitutive. In short, philosophical sensibilities are embedded within the Black experience and the Black experience informs and inflects the morphology of philosophical thought. hooks' work is fueled by processes of elenchus, as she critically explores issues of identity, subjectivity, postmodern thought and Blackness, Black feminist standpoint, aesthetics, whiteness, and patriarchy. hooks has created a broad corpus of work that has impacted feminist thought, cultural studies, critical whiteness studies, and such themes as love and spirituality. While her work has certainly been quoted and debated, there is still much to be done in terms of a *collective* effort to give her work the critical attention that it deserves. In *Breaking Bread, Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), Cornel West and hooks mutually engage each other's work in an effort at greater mutual clarification, specificity, and criticality. While this book does not include a panoply of critical voices, it does function as an important lens through which to explore and appreciate hooks' work. This edition of the *Newsletter* does not engage in apotheosis; it is not a short hagiography. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the breadth of critical, philosophical thought generated by Black thinkers, and, in this case, a Black woman; it is a testament to the historical interplay between the fruitfulness that exists between philosophy *and* the Black experience. Consistent with our efforts here, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy recently have co-edited *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* (New York: Routledge, 2009), which will be reviewed in our next issue of the *Newsletter*. Davidson and Yancy strategically divide their book into three sections, Critical Pedagogy and Praxis, the Dynamics of Race and Gender, and Spirituality and Love, as a way of maximizing critical commentary and being attentive to the synoptic scope of hooks' work.

During our tenure as editors of the *Newsletter*, we have provided important themes to enrich the interplay between philosophy *and* the Black experience. We will continue to provide stimulating and critical philosophical contributions that extend and challenge our collective and individual understanding regarding philosophy and the Black experience. In the future, we will continue our effort to give space to a single thinker whose work deserves special attention, while continuing to offer a plurality of philosophical themes, positions, and frameworks that critically bear upon philosophy and the Black experience.

In the first essay, Robert Birt engages hooks' understanding of self-creation, transcendence, and resistance. More

specifically, he engages hooks' work by addressing her point that "opposition is not enough." For hooks, there is what she calls a vacant space after opposition/resistance. Birt critically raises the question of whether or not the beginning of self-creation, of making oneself anew, can be part of the very movement of resistance itself. Birt explores this very important question within the context of situating hooks' concerns for self-making around her discourse on "postmodern blackness," making critiques of racial essentialism, and challenging "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and promoting the "decolonization" of black consciousness.

In the second essay, Maria Dixon and Mark Lawrence McPhail bring together in a dialogically critical fashion the work of Ella Baker and bell hooks. Dixon and McPhail argue that "much of what hooks calls for in her theoretical work was embodied by Baker in her life practices, and much of what Baker articulated and anticipated in her life hooks has embraced and extended in her writings on language, identity, and difference." They examine these thinkers independently and taken together, demonstrating that Baker and hooks offer a discourse of political and personal transformation grounded in the notion of "radical love," one which challenges dominant notions of difference, identity, and oppositionality. They argue that radical love belies hatred toward the other and involves a form of "border-crossing" that reaches out to the other in terms of his/her own uniqueness. Baker and hooks are both viewed as indefatigable warriors committed to social justice not merely in abstract terms, but in terms of loving one's neighbor and reaching across socially constructed divides that militate against a collective sense of community.

In the third essay, Namulundah Florence chronicles hooks' social theory and throughout her chapter shows its relevance to pedagogy. Florence makes clear that hooks' "critical corpus of writing militates against the term indoctrination." Fighting to create spaces of freedom and dialogue, Florence argues that indoctrination is a force which is antithetical to hooks' philosophy of engaged pedagogy and that it belies practices of freedom. Not just for students and teachers, Florence argues that hooks' philosophical commitment to praxis is a call "for the re-definition of self and reality that extends to students, teachers, parents, and communities." In short, Florence shows how hooks' social critique focuses on the tripartite interlocking "isms" of racism, sexism, and classism.

In the fourth essay, Joy Simmons explores bell hooks' notion of rage. Simmons uses hooks' text *Killing Rage* to critique the notion that somehow Black rage is something that is pathological or characteristic of the mythology that Black people are prone to violence. Using hooks' text as a medium through which to make sense of the phenomenon of Black rage, she sees Black rage as an important contributor to instigating resistance to white power. In this sense, Black rage is productive; it is indicative of an anti-complacent attitude toward structures of power and dehumanization. In stream

with hooks' approach, Simmons engages her own voice and her own experiences for insights. As a white woman, Simmons is also concerned with ways in which she is implicated in white racist hegemony and how her own rage might be used against the various ways in which she is subject to processes of white interpellation. Avoiding an uncritical understanding of what it means for whites to identify with Black suffering and pain, Simmons recognizes the continuous effort involved in processes of "feeling-with" Black people and how, through this process, white people might begin to express rage at both the continuation of Black pain and suffering and the ways in which white people continue to benefit from white power.

In the final essay, James Haile explores hooks' conception of love as it is related to Blackness. He maintains that hooks does not advance an abstract, universalistic conception of love, but gives critical attention to the way in which love is manifested within the context of how Black people ought to relate to themselves. It is a form of love that takes as its loved object the epidermis of Black people. On this course, according to Haile, while hooks' conception of love is an embodied concrete particularity, it has deep political implications for Black people at the level of their collective unity. Haile also argues that hooks' conception of love qua Black love is always already a critique of whiteness, especially given the latter's history of instilling in Black people various forms of self-hatred. Haile goes on to theorize hooks' conception of love as it relates to issues of language and identity formation, suggesting that love opens a creative space for Black people to engage in radical acts of re-signification and new ways of understanding Blackness and new ways of relating to themselves and the world.

ARTICLES

Transcendence in the Thought of bell hooks: Some Reflections on Resistance and Self- Creation

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... [A] fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic ways of seeing, thinking and being that block our capacity to see ourselves *oppositionally*, to imagine, describe, and *invent* ourselves in ways that are liberatory.

—bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

Decolonization is the veritable *creation* of new men... [T]he "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself."

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Human being *is* transcendence. We are characterized more by a dynamic of *becoming* than the fixity of being; or rather our *being* is becoming. We are never wholly what we are—never *merely* teacher or student, worker or boss, colonizer, native, or "Negro."¹ We *are* always more and other than what we are. We are as perpetual surpassing, an unending going beyond. Ultimately we are human insofar as we *make* ourselves *subject*—self-creation being perhaps the most unique

manifestation of human freedom. But when transcendence is thwarted by social oppression, it must assert itself as *resistance* if it is to thrive as self-creation.

Transcendence as resistance *and* self-creation (sometimes politically termed "self-determination") is an enduring theme in African-American thought. This essay offers brief reflections on this theme in bell hooks, though only in a thin slice of her copious works. bell hooks does not philosophically thematize transcendence, but it is central to her conception of subjectivity—especially "radical black subjectivity."² Whether she is discoursing on "postmodern blackness," making critiques of racial essentialism, challenging "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," or promoting the "decolonization" of black consciousness, hooks' essential concern is the enabling of self-creation and a liberated identity. In her own words her concern is with "how the dominated, the oppressed, the exploited *make* *ourselves* *subject*."³

Now this emphasis on "making" ourselves subject clearly indicates the primary importance of praxis, and even perhaps the philosophical premise that the human being is primarily action.⁴ We could not meaningfully speak of making ourselves subject if free, creative action were not intrinsic to our existence, or if we were bound by a fixed and given nature. In a sense the human being is always subject. Human being is transcendence even when loaded with chains. But what becomes of transcendence when loaded with chains? Is it not blocked, cut off, thrown back upon itself, denied? The subject is made object. Black philosopher Frantz Fanon attests to this when he writes that he had come "into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things" only to discover himself (under racist French colonialism) to be an "object in the midst of other objects."⁵ Similar experiences are attested to throughout the history of African-American literature and popular culture. bell hooks, who has studied Fanon and resembles him in her emphasis on a politics of *decolonization*, also notes how the imperial white gaze and a culture of white supremacy works to reduce blacks to the status of objects. "A culture of domination," she writes, "demands of all its citizens *self-negation*. The more marginalized, the more intense the demand."⁶ For American Blacks, as a domestically colonized people, this "demand" has often meant being compelled to "assume the mantle of invisibility, to *erase all traces of their subjectivity*..."⁷ Oppression is a dam which blocks the free flow of transcendence. It can be breached only with the weapons of resistance. Transcendence must become insurgent, consciousness oppositional. Without resistance self-creation is impossible.

It is evident throughout hooks' numerous works that resistance, opposition even within spaces of marginality, is indispensable to the freedom of self-creation. This is so especially insofar as oppressed peoples tend to internalize their oppression—the crippling internalizing of white supremacist and patriarchal values by African-Americans being of special concern for her. But is resistance only a *necessary condition* of self-creation, or is it an active and positive part of self-creation? bell hooks' own words suggest a clear distinction:

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*? Opposition is not enough. In that *vacant space* after one has resisted there is still the necessity to *become—to make oneself anew*. Resistance is that struggle we can most easily grasp. ... That space within oneself where resistance is possible remains. It is different then to talk about becoming subjects.⁸

Professor hooks' language seems to reveal a certain tension. Is resistance or opposition merely negative, merely negation of oppression and dehumanization? Or can it also be at least the beginning of the process of "becoming subjects"? In short, is opposition or resistance already the beginning of self-creation, of "creative, expansive self-actualization"? bell hooks seems to stop short of making the latter claim, emphasizing only the power of at least some forms of resistance to "enable" creative self-actualization. But enabling creative self-actualization is not the same as *constituting* or bringing it about. And Professor hooks' talk of a "vacant space" *after* resistance wherein it is still necessary to "become" and "make oneself anew" certainly implies a great distinction between resistance and self-creation. Of course, her description of a vacant space after resistance may be read metaphorically.⁹ Yet the very force of that metaphor suggests that there is in hooks' understanding of subjectivity a transcending movement of resistance which aims to liberate us from what Fanon calls a "crushing objecthood," and a quite *different* and distinctive transcending movement of self-creation.

But is there necessarily a blank space after resistance? Could it be that at least the beginning of self-creation, of making oneself anew is part of the very movement of resistance itself? We can agree with Professor hooks that resistance is not enough insofar as it is mere negation. Any human identity is likely to be impoverished if it exhausts itself in mere resistance. But what if resistance cannot be genuine if it is not also creative? What if it is an affirmation as well as a negation? Perhaps there is something to Fanon's claim that decolonization, itself a movement of resistance, is also a veritable creation of "new men" with "a new language and a new humanity."¹⁰

Now, I do not allude to Fanon gratuitously or as mere coincidence. bell hooks has frequently mentioned in her writings the intellectual influence of Frantz Fanon. And we can find between them a common emphasis on the need for decolonization and for radically making oneself anew—in Fanon's language trying to "set afoot the new man."¹¹ For both of them this entails a radical transformation of the social structure and human consciousness. This transformation is seen by both of them as being as much moral, spiritual, and cultural as it is political and economic. For both thinkers this transformation must be *radical* if it is not to be deflected and thwarted.¹²

But for Fanon this radical transformation of person and society must at least *begin* during the phase of resistance, perhaps as part of the resistance, or it is unlikely to be realized at all. The transformation which begins to "set afoot the new man" must certainly continue after revolutionary resistance to the colonial system has triumphed, and most profoundly after that triumph. For if the process of personal and social transformation does not continue, colonialism may be replaced by neocolonialism; and the formerly colonized native may then learn from painful experience that "exploitation can wear a black face" as well as a white one.¹³ But the process of self-transformation, self-creation, does not seem to begin in a blank space after resistance. Resistance and self-creation seems at least coterminous in Fanon, with perhaps more of a continuum than a blank space.

bell hooks, who is no less desirous of radical change than Fanon, and who, as a *revolutionary* feminist black woman, goes further than Fanon in radically criticizing patriarchy and rethinking gender relations, puts more emphasis on the difference between resistance and self-creation. In her essay "Love as the Practice of Freedom," she mentions how her reading of one of Dr. King's essays reminded her of where "true liberation leads us." And she finds that it "leads us *beyond* resistance to transformation."¹⁴ Of course, genuine

transformation of self cannot simply reduce itself to resistance. Yet I wonder if it isn't possible from within bell hooks' own conceptual framework to understand resistance and self-creation as at least partially coinciding in one movement of transcendence.

In her essay on love hooks recalls Dr. King's statement that the aim of the freedom movement is "the creation of the beloved community." Yet Dr. King believed he saw at least the beginnings of the beloved community in the Selma movement—in the struggle against disfranchisement of blacks. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks notes that the "*oppositional* black culture that emerged in the context of apartheid and segregation has been one of the few locations that have provided a space for the kind of decolonization" which makes "loving blackness possible."¹⁵ Yet in *Yearning*, bell hooks recalls within that very space of resistance a vital experience of *community*, of deep relational love that she thinks so essential to self-transformation.¹⁶ And in the "Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity" she quotes with obvious approval Toni Cade Bambara's comment that "it perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the risk of creating a new identity...*via* commitment to the struggle."¹⁷ But isn't creating a new identity *via* commitment to struggle self-creation through resistance? And when bell hooks calls upon her black brothers to "reconstruct black masculinity," and to radically challenge limiting "phallogentric" and "conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity,"¹⁸ isn't she advocating a transformation of self and consciousness so radical as to be already a praxis of resistance? To what extent is a liberating self-creation itself a form of resistance? Perhaps what is called for is a more thoroughgoing inquiry into the meaning(s) of resistance itself. At least some forms of resistance are movements of self-creation. At least some efforts at self-creation are inexorably praxes of resistance.¹⁹

In short, while we may agree with hooks that "opposition is not enough," we may still wonder if there may not be creative moments within resistance rather than a "vacant space" preceding the making of ourselves anew. A transcending movement of "expansive self-actualization" may coincide with, and partly emerge from, the transcending movement of resistance. Self-creation may prove to be coterminous with resistance. Instead of a blank space, we have a continuum. Human transcendence always involves *becoming*, but for oppressed people whose transcendence is denied self-creation often finds its founding moments in resistance. For people who are radically oppressed it may be otherwise impossible to reclaim their transcendence at all.

Endnotes

1. Of course I do not mean to deny social realities. Race and class hierarchies are *real* and greatly shape one's life chances. But these realities are not dictated by natural law or divine fiat. They are historical-social creations of human beings, open to redress by human action.
2. I'm thinking particularly of her essay "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity" in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 15-22.
3. Hooks, *Yearning*, 15.
4. I'm speaking broadly of praxis as "free conscious, creative" activity. While praxis in the senses used by Marx, Sartre, and (at least implicitly) Fanon has special resonance for me, I do not attribute this philosophical inclination to hooks.
5. Frantz Fanon. *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.
6. bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 19.
7. hooks, *Black Looks*, 168. The italics are mine.
8. hooks, *Yearning*, 15. Italics are mine.

9. It certainly seems unwise to read the vacant space *after* resistance to imply some temporal sequence or designation.
10. Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).
11. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 316.
12. bell hooks' comradely criticisms of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s seem to suggest that they were not *radical* enough. Resistance didn't go far enough. The Black Power movement, which often sought to be (and to an extent was) revolutionary, often assumed uncritically patriarchal constructions of gender relations. And the mainstream feminist movement, as mainly a movement of privileged white women, often proved easy to co-opt into the political and corporate structure of domination—commonly marginalizing radical or revolutionary feminism which seeks to end *all* forms of domination.
13. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 145.
14. bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 250. My italicization.
15. hooks, *Black Looks*, 10.
16. I'm referring to the essay called "Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community," 33-40.
17. hooks, *Yearning*, 17.
18. From "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" in *Black Looks*, 89.
19. Consider something as simple as Frederick Douglass' effort to become literate and eventually an organic intellectual. Angela Davis, noting that Douglass defiantly decided upon literacy precisely because his master forbade it as an activity which would make him unfit to be a slave, reasons that choosing to read was already an act of resistance. But the act of becoming literate was also a process by which Frederick Douglass began to remake himself. Learning fundamentally changes his outlook and personality. His act of defiance becomes an act of self-transformation. And once conscious self-creation begins there is no fixed point where it necessarily ends.

Radical Dialogue: Ella Baker, bell hooks, and A Renewed Rhetoric of Spiritually Inspired Militancy

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The Black freedom movement in America has, since its inception, gravitated between diverse and sometimes divergent tensions between identity and identification, between principles and practices, and between symbolic and social action. One arena in which these tensions have been especially evident is in the struggles of African-American women, who have historically often been thrice burdened by the markers of race, gender, and class, and whose struggles have always problematized the separation between individuality and community. Two women whose understanding of these burdens and separations have powerful and provocative implications for progressive and emancipatory action are the civil rights activist Ella Baker and the post-civil rights cultural critic and public intellectual bell hooks. Baker and hooks serve in many ways as bookends of the modern struggle for civil rights and social justice, yet the relationship between the two has rarely been discussed or explored by cultural critics. Indeed, the paucity of research that connects the two in any manner points to a significant oversight by scholars committed to articulating a carefully and coherently theorized program for liberatory *praxis*.

It is our intention here to remedy this oversight by bringing into dialogue these two important voices that have so eloquently brought to our attention the troubling interconnected social realities of racism, sexism, and class oppression. Although clearly connected by common commitments to activism and dialogue, the similarities between bell hooks and Ella Baker have yet to be adequately explored by rhetorical scholars. Both women have been instrumental in articulating the foundations and directions of African-American feminist theory and *praxis*, and yet their shared moral and ideological impulses have largely gone unnoticed, despite the provocative and powerful potential of such a recognition. Both women have offered cogent critiques of the incoherence of Black patriarchy, both believed in the importance of moving marginal voices to the center of public discourse, and both recognized the clear connection between political commitment and personal action. Indeed, it was Baker's insights and influence that created the conditions in which the phrase "the personal is political"¹ became a part of the progressive lexicon of the sixties, but unlike the movements that it influenced, neither Baker nor hooks have seen the need to separate the secular realities of material culture from the spiritual impulses that guide emancipatory struggle.

In this essay we will suggest that a critical re-reading of Baker and hooks offers an important opportunity to extend and enhance the theory of "spiritually inspired militancy," elsewhere identified as a key discursive strategy of African-American protest and social action.² Viewed both independently and taken together, Baker and hooks offer a language of political and personal transformation grounded in the notion of "radical love," one which challenges dominant notions of difference, identity, and oppositionality. Baker's acknowledgement of the need for a "radical" re-visioning of politics and discourse, coupled with hooks' conceptualization of dialogue as a transformative practice, offers an enlarged understanding of the power of language to redefine and reshape our senses of self and other, and to achieve in practice as well as theory the elusive possibility of "beloved community."³ More importantly, their careful consideration of the politics of gender and sexism as reifications of essentialist oppositionality reveal the powerful tensions and contradictions that have undermined the African-American freedom movement, and continue to limit the possibilities of contemporary progressive politics.

Exploring the relationship between Baker and hooks thus extends and enriches our understanding of rhetoric and race, and offers provocative opportunities for integrating the ideals of cultural critique with the realities of lived experience. Much of what hooks calls for in her theoretical work was embodied by Baker in her life practices, and much of what Baker articulated and anticipated in her life hooks has embraced and extended in her writings on language, identity, and difference. Our consideration of these two remarkable women will illustrate the common moral and ideological commitments that they share, and how those commitments open spaces for a rethinking of the problems and possibilities of radical resistance. We will begin with a brief account of the existing research that draws connections between Baker and hooks, and then consider how hooks explicitly connects Baker to her own work on black feminist theory and criticism. Finally, we will explore how their shared ideological and epistemological concerns offer a re-theorizing of the notion of spiritually inspired militancy that further offers important directions for contemporary critical thought and action, and a rethinking of those rhetorics of identity and difference that still remain overshadowed by dominant conceptualizations of language, life, and culture.

Re-centering a Marginalized Voice: Ella Baker's Absence from Rhetorical and Cultural Studies

Although one of the most influential voices in the American civil rights and progressive movements, Ella Baker has largely been ignored by scholars writing in the area of rhetorical studies. While featured in various anthologies of the Civil Rights movements, as well as books devoted specifically to Black women in the movements, Baker is conspicuously absent from critical and biographical studies of black rhetoric,⁴ and receives scant attention from progressive scholars writing in the traditions that she in many ways initiated. The lack of attention that she has received from feminist scholars, both black and white, is especially difficult to understand, since Baker anticipated and articulated many of the foundational issues and concerns regarding women's identities and social positions addressed by these writers.

The most extensive exploration of Baker's life and words, Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, offers some initial insights into Baker's marginalization in contemporary thought and discourse: "Ella Baker was part of a powerful yet invisible network of dynamic and influential African American women activists who sustained civil rights causes, and one another, across several generations."⁵ Although a prominent figure in three of the nation's most visible civil rights organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Non Violent Organizing Committee (SNCC), Baker largely escaped the attention of scholars of civil rights and progressive politics both during her lifetime and after her death in 1986.

Some of the reasons for this absence are predictable. As Ransby notes, Baker's status as an African-American woman involved in the organizing tradition of activism precluded her inclusion in intellectual traditions that privilege masculinity and mobilizing as hallmarks of leadership. Yet Baker's own sense of identity was also instrumental in her invisibility. She was openly critical of the elitism of many male African-American civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and unconvinced that mobilizing leadership and rhetoric had the potential to bring about radical change. Thus, her absence from rhetorical scholarship is also not difficult to understand, since the field of public address has been dominated until very recently by scholarship that emphasized charismatic [white and male] speakers who moved audiences to action with compelling oratory and persuasive appeals.

Baker was especially suspicious of this tradition, and consciously distanced herself from it, choosing instead to look to the masses for leadership, and to enact her influence behind the scenes and out of the public eye. Catherine Orr's excellent bio-critical essay on Baker, one of the few rhetorical studies of her life and words, explains Baker's basic beliefs about language and leadership: "Her speechmaking emerged, not from a desire to lead others or to speak for a movement, but rather from the belief that her role was one of facilitating the growth of others within movements."⁶ In a culture that privileges individuality and self-interest, often at the expense of community and empathy, it is not difficult to understand why Baker's voice has for so long been silenced.

Yet despite her self-effacing and humble demeanor, Baker was, when she chose to be, as powerful a speaker as any of her male contemporaries, and in many ways far more influential. She established the cultural consciousness of SNCC, which was one of the most significant civil rights organizations in the nation during its short existence and was a training ground for many of the major figures in the anti-war, free speech, and feminist

movements.⁷ Indeed, long before white feminists claimed that "the personal is political" Ella Baker lived these words: "Baker's theory of social change and political organizing was inscribed in her practice. Her ideas were written in her work: a coherent body of lived text spanning nearly sixty years."⁸ According to Ransby, Baker "helped advance a political tradition that is radical, international, and democratic, with women at its center,"⁹ and while her values and beliefs were grounded firmly in African-American culture and tradition, her concerns were global, and her vision international.

Baker created and sustained alliances across boundaries of race, gender, and nationality, and remained throughout her life a committed activist and social critic. She anticipated many of the issues raised by hooks, such as the need to reconcile gender and class divisions in the African-American community and beyond, the inclusion of marginalized voices in the struggle for freedom, and an understanding of spirituality as embodied knowledge and action unfettered by the bureaucratizing impulses of organized religious institutions and beliefs. Even though she was not a teacher, she was deeply committed to what hooks calls "teaching to transgress," empowering others to think and act for themselves, but also in the service of others. "She even taught Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a thing or two—despite his resistance—by insistently nudging him to reach out to ordinary people," explains Joanne Grant. Grant observes that "King saw the need to mobilize the masses, but he did not understand the need to organize them. Baker did her best to try to turn him into an organizer."¹⁰ Like King, Baker's commitment to civil rights allowed her to dialogue even with those with whom she had fundamental disagreements; she thus embodied the very notion of dialogue that hooks believes is necessary for genuine personal and social transformation.

Despite the clear connections between Baker and hooks, however, few writers have considered the two in relation to each other. Ula Taylor views Baker, because of her influential role in the establishment of SNCC, as a progenitor of the women's liberation movement, and sees hooks' work as representative of a "shift in Black feminism," which viewed the personal as "political" only to the extent to which it contributed to the creation of "a liberatory feminist theory and praxis."¹¹ Taylor, however, draws no explicit connection between the two women. Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker's essay on community organizing and the organizing tradition, attributes to hooks the concept of a "woman centered model" of community organizing and compares it with the "Alinsky model," arguing that neither may offer an adequate strategy for facilitating successful social change. Interestingly, they see Baker (who undoubtedly influenced Saul Alinsky since he served as a volunteer in Mississippi in 1964) as offering an integrative vision of the two positions: "Ella Baker's comments that 'real organizing' is working in small groups with people so that they can discover their competencies, and then 'parlaying those into larger groups,'" Stall and Stoecker conclude, "is an example of bringing together the organizing process components of the Alinsky and women-centered models."¹²

Baker's vision integrated two of the organizing trajectories that emerged in the wake of Freedom Summer, and anticipated an understanding of progressive action that would later be embraced by hooks. "Baker's emphasis on grassroots participatory democracy stemmed from her realization that the forces being mobilized by SNCC in the 1960s were potentially some of the most radical in the nation," explains Ransby, who goes on to say that "Her philosophy was not simply to 'let the people decide,' as the popular SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) slogans suggested. Rather, it was to let the disenfranchised vote, let the silenced be heard, let the

oppressed be empowered, and let the marginalized move to the center.”¹³ The failure of this center to take hold has been one of the great paradoxes of the post-Civil Rights era, one that scholars such as hooks have struggled with and attempted to explain. Her own references to Baker lend insight into this failure, and further reflect the common concerns which connected the two women across generations: the struggle against gender inequality in black life and culture, and the need to create transformative ways of speaking. Both of these concerns are also addressed in the theory of spiritually inspired militancy. Further exploration of the connections between Baker and hooks will allow us to take that theory in some important and powerful new directions.

Speaking to Transgress: Ella Baker, bell hooks, and a new Rhetoric of Spiritually Inspired Militancy

Because of the feminist impulses that guide hooks’ work, Stall and Stoecker associate her with a “women centered” approach to organizing, but this association fails to fully grasp the extent to which hooks’ thinking on feminism is actually closer to Baker’s views than those articulated by mainstream white feminists. “My feminism took root in the Black southern segregated world of my youth in Kentucky—in the dignity and integrity of Black womanhood in my church and in the domestic battles in my household,” hooks explains. hooks continues, “Feminism didn’t come to me from the space of Whiteness, but from the concrete reality of seeing men in my community keep women down and from my thinking I deserve more than that.”¹⁴ Even though she never referred to herself as a feminist, Baker’s experience of and response to black sexism was strikingly similar to hooks’. “A rhetoric of racial equality marked the public pronouncements of the SCLC leaders, while old hierarchies based on gender inequities endured within their ranks,” notes Ransby. Subsequently, “Baker refused to accept the situation in silence.”¹⁵ Baker raised the awareness of the men and women around her, encouraging those whom she influenced to challenge essentialized notions of gender and race, and challenging those notions herself through her actions and words. According to Ransby, she personified Joy James’ notion of a “profeminist” stance, that of “someone who is a strong advocate of gender equality and liberatory concepts of manhood and womanhood, without a self-conscious investment in the term ‘feminist’ or its attendant theories.”¹⁶ Baker’s primary investment was in a struggle for social justice that transgressed established boundaries of race, gender, nationality, and class, a struggle rooted in but not constrained by fundamentally spiritual impulses.

Those impulses were largely lost in the white progressive movement that emerged in the 1960s, which, although invigorated by the black freedom struggle, shifted toward secularism instead of embracing its spiritual roots. This shift, according to Charles Marsh, contributed significantly to the demise of the vision of “beloved community” embraced by both the mobilizing and organizing traditions of black social protest. The emphasis on community was replaced by an embrace on individuality, and the outward focus on the salvations of others gave way to self-interest, confusing freedom with license. “Christian conviction is stripped away in an existentialist-therapeutic rendering of humanity’s ‘potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity,’” notes Marsh. “The goal of social struggle is neither ‘reconciliation, redemption, and the creation of beloved community,’ nor achieving legal equality through piecemeal reform, but ‘finding meaning in life that is personally authentic.’”¹⁷ Although Marsh is quoting the Port Huron Statement drafted by SDS in 1962, the sentiments expressed within it were also expressed in the women’s liberation movement, which similarly emphasized

secular individuality over the larger commitment to community embodied in the black freedom movement that established the social and symbolic spaces out of which the white women’s movement emerged. The result was a reification of [white] individuality embedded in demands for gender equality that largely excluded the voices and contributions of black women.

The critique of this reification is central to hooks’ work, and provides an important point of connection between her contemporary theoretical project and the lived historical contexts out of which it emerged. “While Betty Friedan was writing about ‘the problem that has no name,’ addressing the ways sexist discrimination affected highly educated white women with class privilege,” hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, “Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ann Moody, along with individual black women across the nation, were challenging the sexism within the black civil rights movement. Appropriating the vernacular of black liberation, white women called their resistance to sexism women’s liberation.”¹⁸ Like the white men and women involved in the student and anti-war movements, feminists drew upon the ideological resources of the black organizing tradition without also embracing its moral and spiritual impulses. This rupture between the sacred and secular that marked white protest movements is reflected in the limitations observed by Stahl and Stoecker in both the “woman centered” and “Alinsky” organizing models, and while they associate hooks with the former they fail to recognize her implicit critique of the approach, nor her explicit call for an approach to organizing that echoes Baker’s.

Indeed, in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks offers an analysis similar to that presented by Stall and Stoecker: “The separation of grassroots ways of sharing feminist thinking across kitchen tables from the spheres where much of that thinking is generated, the academy, undermines feminist movement,” she writes. “It would further feminist movement if new feminist thinking could be once again shared in small group contexts, integrating critical analysis with discussion of personal experience.”¹⁹ While hooks does not directly mention Baker, the connection here between local organizing and political action is clearly consistent with Baker’s own linking of critical thinking to concrete social conditions.²⁰ This linkage is also reflected in hooks’ construction of a lineage of women that leads directly from the black freedom movement’s organizing tradition to contemporary black feminist thought.

The lives of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Lucy Parson, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Angela Davis, Bernice Reagon, Alice Walker, Audrey Lorde, and countless others bear witness to the difficulty of developing radical black female subjectivity even as they attest to the joy and triumph of living with a decolonized mind and participating in ongoing resistance struggle.²¹

The narratives of black women involved in the movement for racial justice and equality offer powerful insights into how the essentializing of gender and race complicate and undermine the transformative potential of social protest, theoretical inquiry, and liberatory struggle.

In addition to revealing the limitations of the women’s liberation movement, black women’s lives and words have also offered insights into the ways in which essentialized conceptions of gender within the black community have undermined the quest for racial equality and social justice. “Sexism has diminished the power of all black liberation struggles—reformist or revolutionary. Ironically, the more

black radical nationalist liberation efforts were informed by a sexism much more severe than any present in earlier civil rights reform,” hooks writes in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. “The legacies of Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and many unknown black women testify to the force of their presence, intensity and value of their contributions to the civil rights struggle.”²² Although their legacies have been sustained in the lives and struggles of those they influenced, the contributions of these black women have largely been overshadowed by those of men like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. This reflects not only gender bias, but bias also in terms of the deployment of different uses of language: one which privileges men much in the same way that it privileges persuasion, that emphasizes mobilizing over organizing, that focuses on eloquence at the expense of empathy. Bringing Baker and hooks into conversation enables an interrogation of this bias that offers an enlarged understanding of the importance of the organizing tradition in the struggle for racial and social justice, and the potential for language to transform our understanding of identity, difference, and democracy.

That potential has been theorized in what I (McPhail) have described elsewhere as a tradition of spiritually inspired militancy in African-American discourse. This tradition begins with Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, and its discussion of sorrow songs, and is expressed in King’s search for “beloved community.” My analysis traces a trajectory of black rhetoric through these two men and up through the theoretical works of hooks, Cornel West, and Michael Eric Dyson.

The legacy of spiritually inspired militancy reflected in the rhetoric of Du Bois and King, and articulated in the postrevolutionary projects of Dyson, hooks, and West, suggests that the future of Black rhetoric and politics rests on our ability and willingness to embrace diverse conceptions of identity, difference, and culture: in short, to reconcile the warring sensibilities of unity and diversity.²³

Central to the discussion of this reconciliation is hooks’ emphasis on dialogue as an alternative to traditional forms of persuasion and argumentation. Ella Baker’s critique of these forms, as well as her recognition of the need to reconcile differences in pursuit of emancipatory action, offers an important opportunity to extend and enhance the theory of spiritually inspired militancy that considers the important influence of black women and the organizing tradition in African-American rhetoric and protest.

Ransby connects Baker to the tradition by way of Du Bois: “Baker, like Du Bois, combined a commitment to self-determination with a vision of social and political transformation in which African Americans would work alongside other oppressed groups to establish a new social and economic order.”²⁴ Also, like Du Bois, Baker’s vision of justice, though informed by spiritual impulses, ultimately moved toward secular and material concerns. Although in her youth, “there was clear evidence that she was the progeny of deeply religious people and that she shared their faith,” as Baker grew older and was introduced to progressive and leftist perspectives, the moral ideals of her early religious beliefs were realized in critical social *praxis*. “As she moved from a religious to a more secular stance, the critical questioning and rebelliousness that marked her youth deepened and broadened. Ella Baker became a radical intellectual and activist with a vision of a new social order.”²⁵ Her radicalism did not, however, preclude the role of spirituality and faith in the creation of that order.

As the guiding force behind the creation of SNCC, Baker gave birth to an organization whose original founders were committed to “a social order permeated by love and the spirituality of nonviolence as it grows from the Christian

tradition.”²⁶ Charles Marsh observes that SNCC’s spirituality represented a diversity of views unified by a common purpose: the realization in the material world of the spiritual ideals of “beloved community”:

SNCC’s founding mothers and fathers were very often radical Christians, exuberantly faithful people motivated by diverse theological sources mixed in unusual, sometimes exotic, combinations according to the demands of the situation. Theological existentialism, holiness fervor, contemplative asceticism, social gospel idealism, Protestant liberal hope, and even some good old-fashioned otherworldliness were all part of the mix.²⁷

Baker helped to form a community of activists committed to finding similarity in difference, and it is in that sense that her identification with the tradition of spiritually inspired militancy is perhaps most clearly illustrated. Baker’s critique of traditional modes of discourse also indicates her connection to this tradition of spiritually inspired African-American rhetoric, and in many ways she anticipated the focus on dialogue that has become central to the work of hooks and other radical black feminists. And like hooks, Baker recognized that dialogue was not the simplistic vision of discourse which assumes that judgment can be withheld and argument put on hold, but that only through difficult debates and hard conversations can we truly reach a point where genuine dialogue can begin.

Ultimately, then, it may make more sense to see King and Baker as, to use Cone’s terms in juxtaposing Martin with Malcolm, “the ‘yin and yang’ deep in the soul of black America.”²⁸ Such a view offers a richer rendering of the theory of spiritually inspired militancy, for it exemplifies the ways in which diverse and seemingly divergent currents in black culture coalesce into a common stream of committed social consciousness. It reveals a connection between radical humanism and radical theology, two sides of the African-American freedom struggle that, despite surface differences, are rooted in a common historical experience that connects resistance with spirituality. “King and Baker had been introduced to politics through the same institution: the southern Black Baptist Church.”²⁹ While King embraced the religious foundations of the church, Baker translated its spiritual impulses into a secular strategy for social action. The traditional Black church, wedded to patriarchy and persuasion, limited the ways in which spirituality and militancy could be combined for Baker.

Indeed, Baker expanded the traditions of black protest that had been limited by its patriarchal and Eurocentric biases, that had focused on the public roles of men while failing to recognize the important influence of women working in quiet places, and that had emphasized the rhetoric of rational persuasion and the rhetoric of reasoned argument without fully acknowledging the power of dialogic and non-oppositional ways of knowing and being. Aprele Elliot’s analysis of Baker’s importance for rhetorical studies can also be applied to her significance for African-American rhetoric: “A reconceptualized model of rhetorical action must acknowledge the potency of women’s contributions. Additionally, the idea of public speaking must be reexamined,” she writes. Elliot concludes that “communicative strategies that address socioeconomic dynamics that facilitate self-esteem and stimulate self direction are critical to studies of rhetorical action. In effect, this transformational perspective encourages an expanded perception of leadership.”³⁰ This transformational perspective also encourages an expanded conception of rhetoric, one that aligns itself with the organizing tradition of leadership as well as the critical interventions of contemporary black feminist thought. This offers a re-visioning of spiritually inspired militancy that is more integrative, and

offers greater potential for translating into social action the ethical and epistemological ideals of an inclusive African-American freedom struggle.

Where Do We Go From Here?: Radical Love as Revolutionary Action in the 21st Century

Stall and Stoecker's characterization, cited above, of bell hooks as representing a womanist view of organizing is in many ways illustrative of the ways in which the white progressive movements born of the Civil Rights movement are sometimes conflated with the movement itself, and ultimately the African-American Freedom struggle in which it was rooted. Returning to those roots, however, reveals that hooks is, in fact, committed not to the secularized womanist orientation of white feminism, but to an understanding of organizing rooted deeply in the spiritually inspired tradition of black self-worth that Baker embraced. Baker's ideological orientation has been described as "a type of radical humanism,"³¹ but this description does not do justice to the spiritual impulses of her work. Although critical of the traditional top down religious approach to leadership that dominated the civil rights movement, Baker nonetheless recognizes the importance of the black church to the freedom struggle. "Her ideas and analysis of the role of the black church, and of the clergy in particular, had changed considerably over the years, but her understanding of the centrality of the institution in African American life and culture remained intact."³² Baker's militancy, though emphasizing the secular concerns of political and social change and justice, was nonetheless spiritually inspired.

That inspiration is perhaps most clear in Baker's conception of leadership and the rhetorical implications it suggests. Baker's radical humanism translated into a style of leadership and language which we describe as "radical servanthood," a form of spiritually inspired militancy that complements the hierarchical approach of the mobilizing tradition of leadership with the more egalitarian and empowering impulses of the organizing tradition. One of the distinctive elements of Baker's life work was her challenge of traditional models of organizational leadership. Her insistence that real leadership begins and ends in the midst of the masses was largely rooted in reclamation of a "servant as leader" typology. Through what amounts to an invocation of the "first shall be last" theology of the Gospels, Baker extols the virtue of the empowered masses as the best instrument for the achievement of social salvation. In one of her most pointed critiques of conventional Civil Rights leadership, Baker spoke of the dangers of depending on the charismatic leader:

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. ...Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.³³

Yet, Baker's concern extended beyond the impact of the charismatic leader on the movement. More importantly, she focused on the impact that such charismatic leadership had on the empowerment of the community at large. In Baker's estimation, any dependence upon a designated "messiah" obscured the more vital role that individuals have in achieving their own "salvation." Her insistence that "People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves"³⁴ called into question leaders that led from the front.

Baker's belief in the centrality of the individual to his salvation serves to transform traditional leadership into radical servanthood. Within Baker's framework, the role of the leader is no longer salvific but is instead developmental. Baker's servant-leader seeks not to be the shepherd, but one who cultivates the sheep to lead themselves to greener pastures. Consequently, the radical servant develops her skills not to lead but to teach others to tap into their own capabilities as agents for change. Here, what is essential for Baker is the radical servant's acknowledgment that any personal desire for the elevation from the "pew to the pulpit" serves only to create a perilous gulf between the radical servant and the greatest vehicle for true social change—the community. Baker believed that the cultivation of the indigenous leadership present *within* the masses must remain the singular focus of the radical servant-leader, and cautioned her listeners against following those African-American leaders who, out of self-interest and opportunism, were little more than wolves masquerading as members of the flock. Though never explicitly naming the male religious leaders of SCLC, including Martin Luther King, Jr., as the objects of her criticisms, Baker was suspicious of the style of leadership they represented. She was particularly critical of King, describing him as a member of the Atlanta black bourgeoisie, who did not earn his leadership but was given it on a silver platter. Although appreciating his oral prowess, Baker was resentful of the adoration ordinary people continued to shower upon the charismatic King. Baker believed such public energies were better spent on the development of community leadership from within rather than a single messianic figure.

As John Dittmer reports, in Baker's Keynote Address at the Freedom Democratic Party Convention, she "issued a warning that went almost unnoticed among outsiders at the meeting: 'We must be careful lest we elect to represent us people who, for the first time, feel their sense of importance and will represent themselves before they represent you.'³⁵ Baker understood the seductiveness of traditional leadership, and cautioned her listeners about their role in empowering not only themselves, but those who would serve to represent their interests. Thus, in addition to being the primary vehicle for change, the community plays an essential role in the cultivation of the radical servant. Baker argues that the radical servant's development is wholly dependent on his immersion and participation in the life of the very communities that he seeks to serve. Elevating the community as the ultimate goal of self-actualization, Baker points out the rationale for self-improvement shifts to a greater emphasis on communal good: "Here is an opportunity for adult and youth to work together and provide genuine leadership—the development of the individual to his highest good for the benefit of the group."³⁶ Therefore, implicit for Baker in this (re)framing of leadership to servanthood is the recognition that the leader can never be truly actualized without full engagement between, from within, and for one's community. Ella Baker's vision of radical servanthood provides the first component of radical love and works to ground hooks' notion of self-love in a dynamic interplay between self, community, and spirituality that is as powerful as it is instructive. Therefore, collectively their lives and works emerge to provide both definitional and operational clarity regarding the nature of radical love and its manifestation in the lives and actions of those committed to social justice.

Similarly rooted at the intersection of self and community that guides Baker's concept of radical servanthood is the challenge bell hooks makes to conventional views of self-love. Rather than positioning self-love as antithetical to the development of community, hooks argues that self-love is an essential component in the effort to erase the stains of oppression and racial separation, noting that "black people

and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines the practices of domination.³⁷ Here we see a very different sense of self than that embraced by white feminists in particular, or by white culture in general. This is not the individuated “self-actualization” that confuses freedom with license, but self-realization that necessitates an inclusion and acceptance of the other. In what must be read as a swift rebuke of the simplistic humanism that attempts to conflate equality with sameness or “color blindness,” hooks retorts that the belief that one must rid herself of identity demarcations of skin color, class background, or culture is a counterfeit argument that only perpetuates the oppression we seek to eradicate.³⁸

More than mere self-regard or self-esteem, hooks’ conceptualization of self-love underscores the need to embrace one’s distinctive shape, size, color, and culture as essential building blocks of a harmonious community. In what must be read as a swift rebuke to the humanist ideology that we are all the same, hooks retorts that the belief that one must rid himself of identity demarcations of skin color, class background, or culture is a counterfeit argument that only perpetuates the oppression we seek to eradicate. While some argue that the demands of faith would indicate a rejection of material difference, a form of rejection that makes it more conducive to be in touch with the will of God, hooks explains that such thinking actually serves to negate the elements of difference that the Divine instilled in each of us upon creation. Consequently, to ignore the differences implicit in our humanity is in hooks’ estimation to ignore the creative designs of God. Additionally, hooks points out that it is this negation of difference that, in the end, serves to cultivate essentialist ideologies that become the “conservative force that sees itself as refusing assimilation and expresses itself in the call for cultural nationalism...to embrace separatism.”³⁹ Conversely, hooks insists that it is self-love that empowers us to ultimately embrace others, building bridges within and across communities. Leaning heavily on the work of Victor Lewis, hooks posits that only when we love ourselves and our respective differences, can we then embrace the differences of others. For hooks, self-love is directly linked to our potential to create the communities in which we strive to be included: “When we heal the woundedness inside us, when we attend to the inner love-seeking, love-starved child, we make ourselves ready to enter more fully into community.”⁴⁰ In short, retreating from our spiritual connectedness in the interests of essentialized individualism is, for hooks, ultimately a dead end.

Together, these two threads, Baker’s vision of radical servanthood and hooks’ invocation of self-love, are woven to form the tapestry of radical love that in turn informs spiritually informed militancy. Radical love, as it emerges from the works of Baker and hooks, reveals the interplay between the self-salvation, collective struggle, and spiritual justice that motivates the search for beloved community that King envisioned as the outcome of the black freedom struggle. For King, love was the means:

But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not *eros*, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not *philia*, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is *agape* which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.⁴¹

King’s militancy was inspired by a spiritual vision which embraced the notion that divine love has as its primary aim the selfless and just care of the other.

At the core of beloved community is this radical conception and experience of love, “radical” in the sense that Baker used the term: “I use the term radical in its original meaning: *getting down to and understanding the root cause*. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done.”⁴² Hooks explains why: “Fear of radical change leads many citizens of our nation to betray their minds and hearts. Yet we are all subject to radical changes every day. We face them by moving through fear.”⁴³ What could be a more radical response to a system built upon closed minds, hard hearts, and fear, than the cultivation of love of self and others? Between Baker and hooks, radical love becomes an active, demanding practice that places in constant tension our ontological commitments to ourselves, others, and the Divine.

Hooks makes clear the connection between radical servanthood, radical love, and an enlarged conception of spiritually inspired militancy: “Love in action is always about service, what we do to enhance spiritual growth.” Importantly, she distinguishes between self-salvation, actualization, and redemptive transformation:

A focus on individual reflection, contemplation, and therapeutic dialogue is vital to healing. But it is not the only way to recover ourselves. Serving others is as fruitful a path to the heart as any other therapeutic practice. To truly serve, we must always empty the ego so that space can exist for us to recognize the needs of others and be capable of fulfilling them. The greater our compassion the more aware we are of ways to extend ourselves to others that make healing possible.⁴⁴

hooks’ conception of love goes well beyond a mere superficial connection between individuals; it encompasses a profoundly radical social vision. “For hooks, the power of love, like the power of faith, forms the basis of a community of resistance that affirms the contingent character of identity and social reality of difference without retreating to the uncertain hopelessness of nihilism, or the brutal certainties of essentialism.”⁴⁵ Even as she grapples with the secular struggles that face progressives and cultural critics, hooks still invokes divinity and spirituality as necessities for understanding the root causes of individual alienation and social division.

Thus, radical love begins with the call to love oneself in order to love the other. As such, radical love affirms that we cannot claim to love anyone else until we are fully realized in our own difference and “design.” Yet, our cultivation of self-love is tempered by the reality that we love ourselves not in service of the self, but as an active process designed in the hopes of making ourselves ready to love others. Part of this process is trading fear and mistrust for engagement and embrace. Radical love is antithetical to fear because when we love we affirm life rather than death, which in the end is the central component of fear. Grounded in the reality that we are created in love by God as *imago deo*, such love provides us with the confidence to embrace our skills, talents, and importance without fear that they are diminished when the skills and talents of others are cultivated. Radical love’s call to us to truly embrace the divinely created self, frees us from narcissistic acts of self-promotion that usually serve only to promote our desire to “be seen.” Instead, having found the love of self, we no longer search for an outer love for affirmation because we have found a more sustaining love within. In fact, radical love, based on the importance of self-love, permits a healthy embrace of our limitations fostering a humility that makes us ripe for greater collaboration with others.

Yet radical love is insistent that it is incompatible with abuse, oppression, or victimization. More than mere self-preservation, radical love argues that because we love the “other” we cannot allow them to be anything other than their fully realized self. Radical love, like *agape*, insists that one who loves cannot allow the one she loves to engage in wrong doing. Therefore, failing to forcefully confront those who erect, participate, and benefit from systems of domination is not love but indicative of a self-hatred that is rooted in ambivalence. Radical love requires us to actively engage and struggle with those for whom the reality of love has yet to emerge. Central to this is the understanding that love stands in opposition to subjugation and forces us to rise in political action wherever oppression exists, for though a product of the head and the heart, love requires action through struggle.⁴⁶ hooks and Baker agree that this struggle, the struggle with those who have not yet emerged into this radical form of love, must be engaged through discourse, lived *praxis*, community action, and of course, a form of diligence that seeks to struggle as long as there is struggle.⁴⁷ Finally, radical love is fueled by a fierce commitment to hope and faith, two fundamental elements of the rhetoric of spiritually inspired militancy.

Ella Baker and bell hooks extend that theory of African-American rhetorical action in powerful and provocative ways, bringing into focus the importance of the organizing tradition and the influences of African-American women in the struggle for human freedom and dignity. Each of these women reminds us that, because the business of struggling for justice has an unintended by product—cynicism—our commitment to struggle must be grounded in something greater than ideological or material foundations. As hooks so eloquently observes: “Those of us who are not cynical...sustain our conviction that we need such bonding not because we cling to utopian fantasies but because we have struggled all our lives to create this community.”⁴⁸ hooks’s words might be read as a paraphrasing of one of Baker’s most well-known statements: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest.”⁴⁹ These words embody Baker’s commitment to an inclusive, dialogic, and transformative vision of language, life, and leadership: a vision that hooks also celebrates in her words, work, and her restless commitment to social justice and civil rights.

Endnotes

1. Barbara Ransby writes that Baker understood “that the political was inherently personal long before it was a slogan for Second Wave Feminism.” *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 369.
2. The notion of spiritually inspired militancy is developed at length in Mark Lawrence McPhail, “Dessentializing Difference: Transformative Visions in Contemporary Black Thought,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13 (2002): 77-95.
3. The first use of the phrase “beloved community” is attributed to the theologian Josiah Royce, founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The phrase was popularized by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a moral and spiritual goal of the civil rights movement. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom offers a comprehensive explanation of the phrase: “Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will

triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.” Retrieved from <http://www.wilpf.org/mlksbelovedcommunity>.

4. The lack of attention to Baker is most likely a result of the discipline’s emphasis on the mobilizing tradition of leadership, and its lack of attention to the organizing tradition. Baker is conspicuously absent from two of the major anthologies on contemporary rhetoric, Richard Leeman’s *African American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1996) and Leeman and Bernard Duffy’s *American Voices: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Orators* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), although the former volume does mention Baker’s student and protégé Robert Moses. Baker’s rhetorical style and influence is acknowledged by Catherine M. Orr in her bio-critical essay “Ella Baker (1903-1986), organizer for civil rights,” featured in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1925-1993: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), and Orr also published an M.A. Thesis on Baker titled “‘The Struggle is Eternal’: A Rhetorical Biography of Ella Baker” (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1991). Aprele Elliot’s essay, “Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 596-603, is one of the few other examples of rhetorical scholarship that considers Baker’s rhetorical impact and implications at any length.
5. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 4.
6. Orr, “Ella Baker,” 13.
7. Baker’s influence on SNCC is readily acknowledged by scholars writing about the organization and its role in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. See for example Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), and Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). SNCC’s significant influence on the progressive movements that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s has been convincingly documented by Doug McAdams’ definitive work *Freedom Summer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
8. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 1.
9. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 6.
10. Joanne Grant. *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 4.
11. Ula Taylor. “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis.” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998): 250.
12. Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker. “Community Organizing or Organizing Community?: Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment.” COMM-ORG: The On-Line Conference on Community Organizing and Development at <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers96/gender2.html> (February 2007), 17
13. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 368. Ransby explicitly connects this quote from her text to hooks in this footnote on page 421: “See hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, for an elaboration of the notion of bringing the marginal sectors of the community as an empowerment strategy and also as a means of enriching a movement’s theoretical understanding of oppression and liberation.”
14. hooks, quoted in Carl Posey, “Sister Knowledge,” *Essence* 26 (1995): 192.
15. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 185.
16. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 367.
17. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 4.
18. bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1984), x.
19. bell hooks. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 24.

20. Joanne Grant makes this connection in *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, when she recalls Baker's comments in a personal conversation they had regarding Baker's grounding of inquiry in concrete contexts: "[Any] critical thinking I developed had to be relevant to the experiences of the Depression. I sought answers and the most articulate groups with such answers were the radical political parties. ... I suppose because I lived in the heart of Harlem, I was much more responsive to the interpretation that went all the way down to the lowest levels of society" (32). See also Baker's speech, "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle." Speech by Ella Baker, given at the institute for the Black World, Atlanta Georgia, 1969. Retrieved from <http://www.netLibrary.com/Reader/EbookPane.aspx>.
21. bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 56-7.
22. bell hooks. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 16.
23. McPhail, "Dessentializing Difference," 80.
24. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 100.
25. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 63.
26. Quoted in Marsh, 88. Baker's commitment to nonviolence, unlike King's, was largely tactical. She did, however, see it as a viable means of facilitating emancipatory struggle.
27. Marsh, 89.
28. James Cone. *Malcolm & Martin & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 271: quoted in McPhail, 79.
29. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 192.
30. Elliot, "Ella Baker: Free Agent," 602.
31. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 194.
32. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 192.
33. Ella Baker. "Women and Community Leadership." *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader in the Black Struggle*, edited by Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 470.
34. Baker, "Women and Community Leadership," 468.
35. Dittmer, *Local People*, 281-2.
36. Ella Baker. "Bigger than a Hamburger." *The Southern Patriot* 18 (1960): 4. Retrieved from Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement at <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sncc2.htm>.
37. bell hooks. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995), 162.
38. hooks is here acutely aware of the ways in which people who have been subordinated or oppressed can become complicit in their own oppression, a recognition important to the cultivation of spiritually inspired militancy. See Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Complicity: The Theory of Negative Difference," *Howard Journal of Communications* 3 (1991): 1-4, and McPhail, "Dessentializing Difference," 86.
39. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 266.
40. hooks, invoking the spirit in *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, edited by Gloria Wade Gayles, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
41. Retrieved from http://stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol4/570425.00-The_Role_of_the_Church_in_Facing_the_Nations_Chief_Moral_Dilemma.htm.
42. Baker, "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle." Quoted in Grant, 218-9.
43. bell hooks. *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 91.
44. hooks, *All About Love*, 217.
45. McPhail, "Dessentializing Difference," 88.
46. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 265.
47. See *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker. A Film by Joanne Grant* (New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 1986). Baker's speech at the Puerto Rican Solidarity Rally in 1974, Baker affirmed these principles in what has come to be known as "her most radical speech." See also Grant, *Ella Baker Freedom Bound*, 211.
48. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 264.
49. Baker's words, originally presented in a speech, are immortalized in *Ella's Song*, by the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Reflections on bell hooks' Social Theory and Pedagogy: Practices of Freedom

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Transgression or border crossing is a central motif that captures bell hooks' stance in life, informs her views as articulated within the context of various dialogical spaces, and is an important value that informs her writings. Her critical corpus of writing militates against the term indoctrination. While she does not endorse the view that anything goes, indoctrination is antithetical to hooks' philosophical commitment to praxis. Hence, her corpus of writing focuses on freeing individuals and groups from socially imposed definitions which tend to stifle efforts at individual and group liberation, whether these socially imposed definitions are racist, sexist, or classist. Her call to liberation is a call for the re-definition of self and reality that extends to students, teachers, parents, and communities with particular reference to African-Americans. The influence of family, especially her outspoken grandmother and her derided, patriarchal norm defying maternal grandfather, Daddy Gus, help explain hooks' investment in self-definitions that are designed to disrupt the status quo of an imperialist, capitalist, white-supremacist patriarchy. She also attributes her "border-crossing" to the various Black teachers that she encountered while attending Crispus Attucks High School in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and later, the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire, Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, and the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, among others. bell hooks walks the talk in opposing debilitating structures within her family, the Black community, U.S. society, as well as within the context of academic practices. As a public intellectual, she works with a broad sense of what constitutes a viable site of intellectual exchange. For example, her forums range from "churches, bookstores, homes where folks gather [to] diverse classrooms in public schools and at colleges and universities" (hooks 2003b, xi).

hooks is atypical in an age replete with various stereotypes of what constitutes a religious life, various meanings of ethnicity/nationality, and various normative assumptions regarding gender and social economic status. Raised within a religious context, hooks' eclectic spirituality includes Christian, but also Buddhist tenets. She raises issues of skin color hierarchy having grown up in a family of siblings with a wide range of skin tones. Her critique of patriarchy begins with resistance to sexism within the immediate family. In what hooks (2003b) views as a dysfunctional family, she is "often in the outsider position and scapegoated, viewed as both mad and yet a threat" (p. 20). A bona fide member of the so-called high-brow Stanford, Yale, and Oberlin universities, and now a distinguished professor of English, hooks rejects conventional views that characterize and define poor academic performance among minorities and resistance to schooling, particularly among urban African-Americans. She models success in having achieved much of what society associates with assertive, intellectual, visionary males. She has since relinquished her academic status to return to her Kentucky roots. Giving up a Distinguished Professorship at the City University of New York (CUNY), hooks claims she was "simply no longer satisfied with [herself] in the classroom

and with the educational climate in the University” (hooks 2003b). Beginning with “informal classes” at the University of Southern California, hooks has devoted her time to writing and “teaching” in academic and non-academic forums. She insists that emotional wholeness, intellectual sophistication, and economic mobility are within reach of all, not merely to W.E.B. Du Bois’ talented tenth. Although renowned as an academician, hooks reiterates and keeps alive her vocation to the “elite” no less than to the so-called ordinary, unschooled folk.

This essay is divided into two primary sections. Section One explores hooks’ social theory in order to provide a basis for her educational theory and strategies for addressing schooling and social malaise. It includes her critique of what she consistently terms the interlocking political system of an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that prevails in the United States. However, focusing on the three primary historical categories of race, gender, and class in no way excludes other categories such as religion or sexual orientation. Section Two discusses hooks’ educational theory. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, hooks offers teachers and students strategies for making education more enjoyable and meaningful. She calls for a re-conceptualization of school curricula and inclusive pedagogical strategies. This section will also include her proposals for addressing debilitating personal habits that undermine human agency. These include but are not limited to male violence and overall consumerism, hedonism, narcissism, privatism, and careerism in society, particularly within the Black community (hooks & West 1991).

Part One: bell hooks’ Social Theory

hooks’ social critique focuses on the tripartite interlocking “isms” of racism, sexism, and classism or what she calls an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy in the United States. Exploitation is a term that hooks finds applicable to Blacks, women, and poorer members of society. Each power structure—race, gender, and class—heightens the privilege of individuals and groups. For example, a white heterosexual man who owns property benefits from existing social structures more than a poor or gay white man. In contrast, exclusion from either group, let’s say, in this case, a Black or lesbian woman, heightens one’s victimhood to existing structures further. hooks insists that victimhood in any one category does not absolve individuals or groups from responsibility for other discriminatory practices. She disputes Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on “The Negro Family” that pits the interests of Black women against those of Black men. Black women are more disadvantaged in a racist and patriarchal society than Black men. Indeed, hooks’ (1994b) educational theory addresses exploitative practices across groups as well as within groups. She writes that:

If we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. 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. (p. 224)

Race

hooks draws upon her lived experience to “question, probe and interrogate” social issues. From an early age, she knew that it was better to be white than Black in a socio-economic

and political system that privileged white interests. It was a world for white people and those that most resembled white people. hooks is quick to clarify that white supremacy is not in opposition to whiteness per se. On this score, she raises the issue of color hierarchy in Black communities. Reflective of the historical privileging of enslaved Blacks who worked in the house versus darker skin Blacks who worked the land and were said to have so-called kinky hair, some contemporary Blacks still prefer one to the other among kin. hooks (2003b) cites the chagrin of Black females when their children want to be “made white.” The attempt to instill a love of Blackness in their children belies the parents’ efforts to appear lighter or make their own hair straighter.

Consistently, in mass media, “the images of Black female bitchiness, evil temper, and treachery continue to be marked by darker skin” (hooks 1994a, 179). In both *The Birth of a Nation* and, later, *Traffic*, “the image of evil is the dark-skinned, naked Black man who goes to the door with a gun, whose erect dick and erect gun threaten—he is fearless” (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006, 81). Media assaults the esteem of Black children (hooks 2003b). hooks states that:

Images of Black men as rapists, as dangerous menaces to society have been sensational cultural currency for some time. The role it plays in the maintenance of racist domination is to convince the public that Black men are a dangerous threat who must be controlled by any means necessary including annihilation. (hooks 1990, 61)

In *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990), *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Bone Black: Memories of Childhood* (1996), and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003b), hooks illustrates the impact of media and art on the existing ideology of racial hierarchy, particularly on African-Americans that watch television seventy hours a week—20 to 30 percent more than whites (Tait and Boroughs cited in hooks 2003b). She views mass media:

...as the biggest propaganda machine for white supremacy, the socialization of everyone to subliminally absorb white supremacist attitudes and values... [saturating people’s minds and structures] with an ideology of difference that says white is always, and in every way, superior to that which is Black. (hooks 1995, 116-17)

Movies like *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Grand Canyon* (1991), and *Rising Sun* (1993) cast Black men as the subordinate other, conditioned to submit to a stronger, more ethical, white male power. hooks argues that:

In the beginning Black folks were most effectively colonized via the structure of ownership. Once slavery ended, white supremacy could be effectively maintained by the institutionalization of social apartheid and by creating a philosophy of racial inferiority that would be taught for everyone. This strategy of colonialism needed no country, for the space it sought to own and conquer was the minds of whites and Blacks. (hooks 1995, 109)

Mass media serves as both normative and prescriptive. It depicts what is socially acceptable and appropriate while prescribing the total absorption of dominant cultural values and attitudes for excluded or denigrated individuals and groups. The tragic events of 9/11 are a classic example. In response to the media coverage, the American public regressed to an:

...imperialist white-supremacist nationalist capitalist patriarchal rage against terrorists defined as dark-skinned others even when there were no images, no concrete proof. That rage spilled over into everyday hatred of people of color from all races in this nation, as Muslims from all walks of life found themselves rebuked and scorned—the objects of random and reckless violence. (hooks 2003b, 9)

The ensuing censorship of free speech across the nation, schools, and colleges was inevitable. And so were the stereotypes of Muslims as intrinsically backward, misogynistic, and violent.

We see similar results of negative socialization in educational practices. The reality of inner city schools belies the purported concern for Black students' academic underachievement. hooks cites Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* to illustrate a trend in school inequity. Whites abandon urban centers, a practice reinforced by racist realtors and class mobility. This practice leaves predominantly Black, Hispanic, or non-white residents in inferior, overcrowded public schools with less funding, less qualified teachers, and a diluted curriculum (hooks 2003b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). Recent calls by people of color to self-segregate may protect students from racial assault but fail to prepare them for an increasingly diverse society. Already, Black students self-segregate for emotional refuge as Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* demonstrates.

hooks (2003b; hooks & West 1991) again draws on her lived experiences to illustrate the ways in which negative socialization is internalized by Black students. She was often ridiculed for being smart. While some Black students are dismissed by those around them for being smart, other students "judge themselves" as unintelligent and "eschew academic excellence." The mockery of studious Black students by peers reflects the latter's socialization by schools and media of education and intelligence as a "white thing." Black students labor under stereotypes of inadequacy, indifference, and laziness; they act out, drop out, fulfilling social expectations. The public hears little of the politics of "shame and shaming" within schools. Studies demonstrate how white teachers show preference to "kids who they think are beautiful, and that those kids tend to be white and fair and straight-haired" (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006, 83). Children no less than adults of different races and classes are pitted against each other (hooks 2003b). Imagine a professor asking a Black student whether his/her admission was based upon an affirmative action or merit.

hooks' personal experience and sociological studies on race and job performance demonstrate that unenlightened white folks "are more comfortable with people of color who act subordinate or are mediocre because this serves as a confirmation bias of their deep-seated belief in the inferiority of non-white groups" (p. 89). She notes that Black teachers can be just as discriminatory as their white colleagues. hooks also acknowledges historical and contemporary whites that are anti-racist. Despite their loss of status, and, in the past, the "risk of life and limb to do so," they choose change over allegiance to white privilege. In the Jim Crow South, her white friends, Ann and Ken, made extensive sacrifices to associate with her. Unfortunately, racist whites command more attention than do their counterparts (hooks 2003b).

According to hooks, the negative impact of socialization has been particularly difficult for Black women. hooks makes little distinction between social hierarchies, viewing any of the forms as biased. Thus, the subjugation of Black females by white men and women and also by Black males illustrates the

interlocking nature of social bias. Feminist (white) campaigns initially excluded Black women while appropriating the Black female's experience of exploitation. White women compared their lot to Black women's experience and campaigned for employment outside the home while ignoring the fact that most Black women were already engaged in such work, and in some cases working in the homes of those very white women. That white women and men receive media attention as well as grants to study the lives of Black folk and not vice versa demonstrates this racial hierarchy. Further, media coverage and public outrage is more intense in response to the rape of white women than that of Black women (hooks 1981, 1990, 2004a, 2004b). Media pundits ignored O.J. Simpson's violent abuse of Black women until the victim was a white female, Nicole Simpson. Violence against Black females becomes an "acceptable" form of acting out in Black men. hooks writes that "Almost all violent Black males have been abused as children. Yet they still believe that violence is an acceptable way to exert power, to influence a situation, to maintain control" (hooks 2004b, 63).

Gender

hooks draws from personal experience and the mass media to illustrate the endemic nature of sexism in the United States. From an early age, hooks (2003b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006) defined herself in resistance to patriarchy, although her parents and teachers tried to socialize her differently. In *Bone Black: Memories of Childhood* (1996a), hooks contrasts her mother's demeanor in the presence and absence of her husband: "how she became energetic, noisy, silly, funny, fussy, strong, capable, tender, everything that she was not when he was around. When he was around she became silent" (p. 98). Not unlike her mother, in many patriarchal families complicit females cover up for husbands and sons. Many Black women attribute Black male anger, irritability, and violence to pressures in a racist society (hooks 1990). Older now, hooks' mother resents her investment in patriarchy. Meanwhile, her father remains "committed to patriarchal thought...even though it keeps him isolated emotionally from loved ones, even though his sexism, and its concomitant violence and abuse has ruined a marriage of more than fifty years" (hooks 2004b, xv). For many Black males, violence becomes a legitimate way to "exert power, to influence a situation, to maintain control" (hooks 2004b, 63). However, hooks contrasts her father with her maternal grandfather Daddy Gus who has repudiated the patriarchal norm in his embrace of affectivity and connectedness.

Describing patriarchal culture, hooks writes:

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks 2004a, 18)

hooks goes on to write:

Patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from having been born male. (hooks 2004a, 116)

Patriarchal domination and control supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence. Religion, school, family, and corporate systems in most societies reinforce this superordination of males. Male visibility as household heads or political representatives, coupled with society's devaluation of female related tasks and characteristics further reinforce the

gender hierarchy. Gender stereotyping and role expectations sanction differences in the socialization of children. Boys learn to be tough, mask feelings, stand their ground, and fight, while girls acquire habits of obedience, service, and subservience (hooks 1992, 2003b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). In contrast with hooks' *Be Boy Buzz*, most children's literature reinscribes patriarchal attitudes and behaviors. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter movie series glorifies "the use of violence to maintain control over others" (hooks 2004a, 52). As children grow older, parents, peers, and community reward or shame youth that uphold or transgress these gender roles.

Similarly, the mass media indoctrinates boys into patriarchal thinking by glorifying war and violence (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Independence Day*, *Men in Black*, *Blackhawk Down*, *Pearl Harbor*, etc.). Even progressive novels such as *Jagged Edge* and *The Analysand* promote patriarchal violence. Homemaking men are viewed as chivalrous for sacrificing corporate power and privileges to do "women's work." hooks attributes the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde split in males to disparities between the harsh reality of most men's lives and an idealized manhood. Rising standards of living—rent, mortgages, child support—sometimes rebellious children and incomplicit partners, in no particular order, belie the myth of male control. hooks asserts that:

If you cannot prove that you are "much of a man" by becoming president, or becoming rich, or becoming a public leader, or becoming a boss, then violence is your ticket in to the patriarchal manhood context, your ability to do violence levels the playing field. On that field, the field of violence, any man can win. (hooks 2004a, 72)

Rarely does society acknowledge the price men pay to uphold the debilitating manhood ideal. Men learn early to deny their feelings and shun dependence on others, particularly mothers. Feeling disenfranchised in the work place, many men feel pressured to conform to patriarchal roles—the tough, detached, principled executive. Ironically, the public expresses shock at increasing male violence, particularly among teenage boys against parents, peers, or even strangers, despite the conventional link of manhood to violence and domination that is reinforced by the mass media (hooks 2004a). hooks views patriarchy as the "single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation" (p. 17). She goes on to say that:

As a product, this rage can be garnered to further imperialism, hatred, and oppression of women and men globally. This rage is needed if boys are to become men willing to travel around the world to fight wars without ever demanding that other ways of solving conflict be found. (hooks 2004a, 51)

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* as well as *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Change*, hooks addresses the plight of Black men in the United States. Objectified since slavery, much of society still views Black men as violent or potentially dangerous despite their touted "uniqueness" as an endangered species. In Black communities, despite reality to the contrary, children learn that their father's love and presence is more central to their survival and well-being than that of their mother's love and presence. However, society depicts many Black men preferring to be playboys than home providers. Socially eroticized and vilified, Black men, as the life of hooks' brother Kenneth exemplifies, receive contradictory messages of who and what they can be. Like most African-Americans, he faced assaults on his self-esteem in public arenas as well as faced the peril of a dysfunctional family. His parents pampered him for being the boy of the family, but he was also subjected to

"verbal abusive shaming or violent beatings" from his patriarchal father for failing to meet the standards of patriarchal maleness. He was expected to be obedient and quiet yet assertive and aggressive, too. He could only show feelings when adults demanded it. For many Black boys, the "bewilderment at the inconsistency of these demands leads to overwhelming feelings of powerlessness" (hooks 2004b, 90). Such depictions run the danger of an essentialism hooks herself consistently discounts, i.e., not all Blacks are academically disconnected, violent and misogynist, unreliable, etc. Herein lies the challenge: staying open to the complexity of human identity and experience, always with the context of the larger society that denies humanity to either one (hooks 1990). Hence, the popularity of youth gangs and adult clubs offer Black males a sense of belonging that traditional family networks appear to lack.

Regardless, the ambivalence lures Black young men to obtain quick money and other transient pleasures at the expense of on-going accountability as Julius Lester's *Look Out, White! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama* illustrates (hooks 2004b). Because the consumerism among youth reflects wider patterns, the claim to a macho identity comes at a high price. hooks writes that:

Thriving on sadomasochistic bonds, cultures of domination make desire for what is despised take on the appearance of care, of love. If Black males were loved they could hope for more than a life locked down, caged, confined; they could imagine themselves beyond containment. ... Whether in an actual prison or not, practically every Black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed. (hooks 2004b, xii)

Forging a Black community requires the redefinition of prevailing gender roles and stereotypes. Nineteenth-century Black leaders like Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B Du Bois recognized the importance of gender equality for racial uplift. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Where Do We Go from Here*, and Malcolm X challenged the capitalistic-based materialism and resultant "false consciousness" perpetuated by unchecked television, movies, as well as state-sponsored lotteries (hooks 2004b). In addition, books such as *The Male Machine*, *Men's Liberation*, *The Liberated Man*, *The Limits of Masculinity*, *For Men Against Sexism*, *Being a Man*, and *White Hero*, *Black Beast* challenge the male passive acceptance of stereotyped sex roles (hooks 2004a).

In contrast, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) report, "The Negro Family," accused Black women of emasculating Black men, sanctioning a need for subjugating Black women. Similarly, Shahrazad Ali's book, *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman*, calls Black men to put women in their place. Furthermore there was a series of *Newsweek* articles in 2003 that cited the dominance of Black women in education and work (hooks 2004b). Views like these have led to an unnecessary jockeying for positions between Black men and women along with envy and jealousy that undermine solidarity (hooks & West 1991). In reality, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, economic pressures compelled families to educate girls while boys took on jobs. White racist society viewed Black men as more of a threat than women. And yet, in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery*, hooks identifies Angela Davis, June Jordan, Fannie Lou Hammer, Joycelyn Elders, Shirley Chisholm, Maya Angelou, among others, as females campaigning for Black liberation and the love of Blackness (hooks 2001).

Females have been said to sanction sexism in their complicity. Their focus on looks, clothing, and their relationship to men reinforces their objectification. hooks attributes sexist attitudes and practices in males as well as females to socialization patterns that promote gender roles and expectations—passivity in females and aggressiveness in males. In a patriarchal culture, females tend to define themselves relative to men as Blacks have relative to white society and privilege. Mass media further reinforces these roles by glorifying male violence and control, while emphasizing the sexual lure in females. But the image of dominating males in homes, workplaces, and on imperialistic quests contrasts with the harsh reality many men confront in a capitalist and racist society. Females become a safe target for this ambivalent macho identity.

Class

hooks critiques the impact of materialism and consumerism on self-definitions and community relations. She believes that consumerism “creates a market culture where one’s communal and political identity is shaped by the adoration and cultivation of images, celebrityhood, and visibility, as opposed to character, discipline, substantive struggle” (hooks & West 1991, 95). The obsession with lotteries reflects a similar fantasy of possessing unearned wealth (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). What ensues is the proliferation of drugs and crime in a culture where people will do anything for money, a nihilism that reflects a pervasive spiritual crisis. For marginalized individuals and groups, the addiction to overspending offers palliative redress of the pain of negation and oppression. hooks writes:

Two addictions affecting Black women, which may not be as evident as alcohol and drug abuse, are food addiction and compulsive shopping. Since constant consumerism is such an encouraged societal norm, it is easy for Black women to mask addictive, compulsive consumerism that threatens well being, that leads us to lie, cheat, and steal to be able to “buy” all that we desire. (hooks 1993, 71)

Within Black communities, the obsession of living out a bourgeois dream of liberal individualistic success absolves many of accountability to community interests. An imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture devalues service, regarding those who serve as unworthy and inferior. Despite working three or more jobs to make ends meet, mainstream culture depicts poor people as insignificant, shift, and lazy. Similarly, teaching, which involves service to the community, has low status.

Another aspect of class bias is the privileging of the educated and of the written word. Similarly, the academic focus on jargonistic, abstract writing, divorcing theory from practice, reinforces socio-economic class distinctions within society. Middle-class norms within schools further disenfranchise students from working-class backgrounds. Mainstream curriculum and classroom interactions reflect a bourgeois bias. hooks notes that, “If one is not from a privileged class group, adopting a demeanor similar to that of the group could help one advance. It is still necessary for students to assimilate bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable” (hooks 1994b, 178). Although public school policy implies a democratic education, the association of college with sophisticated learners and its irrelevance to the real world of work undermines that noble intention. Most college graduates no longer view reading as a “pleasurable activity.” They rarely study or read a book again beyond an acquired degree.

Discounting conventional definitions of Black students’ disconnect from academics, hooks illustrates that Blacks have been at the forefront campaigning for literacy, emancipation,

and racial uplift. Many embraced but also advocated public education given the complexity of their experience as social underdogs in U.S. racial hierarchy. Even during slavery, African-Americans struggled to educate themselves and created schools to further this mission. Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, Jarvis Jay Masters’ *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row*, and Don L. Lee’s (renamed Haki Madhubuti) *From Plan to Planet: Life Studies—The Need for Afrikan Minds and Institutions*, all illustrate Black people’s ambition for schooling. Haki Madhubuti even co-founded the Institute of Positive Education, in 1969, and the elementary school, the New Concept Development Center, in 1972. His goal was to educate black children, specifically steering them away from white “enculturation” and helping them to develop an understanding of their own cultural heritage. Ellis Cose, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X all write about the importance of educational opportunities in their own lives. After emancipation in 1865, most of the four million free Blacks were illiterate. By 1900, 57 percent could read and write. Today there is still a problem with literacy in poorer African-American communities: “[n]owadays in the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarch culture, most boys from poor and underprivileged classes are socialized via media and class-biased education to believe that all that is required for their survival is the ability to do physical labor” (hooks 2004b, 34). Huey Newton’s essay “Fear and Doubt” captures the dilemma of Black boys; a yearning for education but also the fear of failure. In white educational settings, token Blacks play the “ghetto minstrel show” as a protection from “white racialized rage.” The fear of whiteness and Black put-down for success extends across age groups (hooks & West 1991). hooks writes:

Smart Black boys who wanted to be heard, then and now, often find themselves cast out, deemed troublemakers, and placed in slow classes or in special classes that are mere containment cells for those deemed delinquent. Individual poor and working-class boys who excel academically in the public school systems without surrendering their spirit and integrity usually make it because they have an advocate, a parent, parental caregiver, or teacher who intervenes when the biased educational system threatens them with destruction. (hooks 2004b, 39)

Current debates on the resistance of Blacks to education ignore this century old legacy of academic perseverance and excellence. Rarely do folks link this to the prevailing culture of domination in the United States (hooks & West 1991). John McWhorter’s *Losing the Race: Self-sabotage in Black America* suffers this kind of omission. The studious Black male Urkel on the sitcom *Family Matters* is a freak. Through such imagery, mainstream media undermines the commitment to education among Black youth. Orlando Patterson’s *Rituals of Blood*, notes the historical legacy of the dehumanization of Black men. Honest, hardworking Black men still contend with stereotypes of violent, sexual harassers, deceitful, unreliable beings.

In summary, dehumanizing racist, sexist, and classist power structures compel individuals and groups to seek fulfillment in transient and often risky gratifications. A capitalist culture fosters an illusory sense of agency in the form of materialistic and consumeristic pursuits. This love of money and possessions lures individuals into illicit ventures—gangs, crime, and lotteries—that promise quick unearned wealth at the expense of gradual achievements like educational mobility. Also, society undervalues female dominated service or less paying professions. hooks, however, critiques elitist privilege and the academic focus on abstract theory and advocates the importance of lived practice. In schools, the promotion

of bourgeois norms—dress, speech, and manners—alienates students from other social classes. Such norms eschew education as irrelevant to the(ir) real world. That Black youth disdain education as a “white thing” illustrates the power of an “imperialist white supremacist, patriarchy.”

Part Two: bell hooks’ Educational Theory

True to the spirit of Harriet Tubman, Black females have returned to the fold in order to lead fellow members out of the “bondage of racist patriarchal capitalist” definitions to a more humane society as envisioned by the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire, particularly as he articulates this vision in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. hooks calls for a culturally inclusive curriculum that avoids privileging age-old structures of white supremacy. She stresses an engaging pedagogy that honors students’ individuality and cultural identity. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994b) advocates an engaged pedagogy that combines “anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies...for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination...while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students” (p. 10). She draws on personal experiences as a student and cultural critic. Marginalized in her school days for being Black and because she belonged to a working class family, hooks envisions teaching strategies that build on a range of experiences of students in order to foster class participation and make learning more meaningful. As an educator, hooks emphasizes that the “pleasure of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience” (p. 10).

hooks credits Freire for introducing her to critical pedagogy:

I found a mentor and a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberatory. With his teaching and my growing understanding of the way in which the education I had received in all-Black Southern schools had been empowering, I began to develop a blueprint for my pedagogical practice. (hooks 1994b, 6)

Like other critical educational theorists, hooks rejects the assumption of a neutral curriculum and pedagogy. Critical theory highlights the impact of hierarchical power relations on social norms and practices that reflect the interests of powerful structures in society and within schools. On the one hand, subject matter and credit hours illustrate the social value of individual courses. On the other hand, the image of teachers as “dispensers” of knowledge privileges them over recipient students. The hierarchical teacher/students relationship mirrors other unequal social arrangements in families and the larger society. In contrast, hooks’ engaged pedagogy advocates mutuality in teacher/student relations and an openness to re-evaluating existing structures for a more meaningful learning experience. She believes that:

Intellectual life enables one to make sense of reality, to confront and comprehend the concrete...intellectual life is a necessary part of liberation struggle, central to the efforts of all oppressed and/or exploited people who would move from object to subject, who would decolonize and liberate minds. (hooks & West 1991, 150)

hooks’ pedagogy of liberation is linked to her social critique as outlined in Part One of this essay. Over fifty years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* in Topeka, Kansas, legalizing racially

integrated schools, anecdotes and statistics show achievement gaps between Black and white students and between poor and middle-class students. The issue of academic underachievement in minority communities has fueled extensive studies across interest groups. There is greater consensus on the scale and need to address classroom confrontations than on seeking the reasons behind such behaviors or appropriate interventions. John Ogbu (1992) warns against blaming social structures, in particular, a discriminatory school system, for school failure among Black students. The focus on “externalities” ignores personal choice and accountability. He attributes the academic disconnection to differing but also oppositional cultural and language frames of reference that minority students bring to school. These include resistance to school learning as assimilationist (acting white) and a threat to one’s social identity and sense of security, which hooks (2003b) acknowledges. McWhorter (2001) attributes Black students’ underachievement to a cultural crisis-victimology, anti-intellectualism, and isolationism. In “Poverty of the Mind,” Paterson (2006) notes a general disconnect of millions of Black youth from the American mainstream with particular reference to academics. He, however, makes clear that a focus on internal factors in no way absolves the larger society’s racist history or needed redress. Although few in number, the success of charter schools and alternative programs like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) that focus on behaviorist models (set goals, tests, rewards, etc.) demonstrate the effect of individualized learning on academic performance.

As a way of addressing the issue of academic underachievement in minority communities, hooks envisions a critical education that links literacy to racial uplift and wholeness. The dominator culture promotes stability and uniformity rather than taking risks that include embracing human diversity. Renewal in the Black community involves radical reclamation, revision of its past, present, and future identity (hooks & West 1991). Specifically targeting the plight of Black males, hooks writes:

Mass-based literacy programs, especially ones that would target unemployed Black males, which link learning to the development of critical thinking, are needed to rectify the failure of early schooling. Home schooling as well as the formation of progressive schools that educate for critical consciousness are important alternatives for Black males. ...Progressive schooling of Black males can become a norm only as we begin to take their education seriously, restoring the link between learning and liberation. (hooks 2004b, 45)

hooks (1994b) advocates, a) a re-conceptualization of knowledge, b) linking theory to practice, c) student empowerment, d) multiculturalism, and e) incorporation of passion to revitalize the teaching/learning process. Teachers who view their profession as a vocation more readily embrace the demands of hooks’ engaged pedagogy, that is, those who “believe our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students (hooks 1994b, 3). She acknowledges the role students play in creating a learning community, writing that it is “rare that any professor, no matter how eloquent a lecturer, can generate through his or her actions enough excitement to create an exciting classroom. Excitement is generated through a collective effort” (p. 8). The academy, hooks (1994b) maintains:

...is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. 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 a way to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (207)

To counteract a growing “return to nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia,” hooks (1994b) calls for a “recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies” (28-29). A commitment to multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow perspectives that have shaped curriculum and pedagogy. Advocating democratic relations, hooks’ engaged pedagogy accommodates linguistic and cultural differences to make education more consistent with the cultural diversity in most societies. hooks warns against piecemeal inclusions during Black History Month, which only maintain a Eurocentric cultural bias. hooks encourages narrative in classes as well as urging students to write drafts of papers in primary languages if it helps them to articulate their views in Standard English. She states that:

As we educate one another to acquire critical consciousness, we have the chance to see how important airing diverse perspectives can be for any progressive political struggle that is serious about transformation. Engaging in intellectual exchange where people hear a diversity of viewpoints enables them to witness first hand solidarity that grows stronger in a context of productive critical exchange and confrontation. (hooks 1990, 6)

Acknowledging the controversy over Ebonics in the 1990s, hooks (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006) still maintains that the use of students’ “language of intimacy” can be “empowering and comforting.” hooks’ writings decry the ideological biases in what passes for official history and related mainstream norms and practices. The question “What is American?” is selective and reflects exclusive values of the dominant group. Whether legitimate or not, critics of ethnocentrism caution against academic cheerleading in over-zealous attempts to integrate the ethnic experiences of students.

bell hooks’ *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003b) continues to address issues relevant to the teaching/learning process across public schools, colleges, and universities. This book:

...offers practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership...to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning. (xv)

hooks attributes her love of learning to her parents, Veodis and Rosa bell Watkins, who highly valued education. She challenges close-mindedness in families as well as schools. Despite her family’s reservation about some of the issues she raises, they admire her success.

hooks (2003b) commends contemporary progressive educators across the world for creating a pedagogical revolution by challenging institutionalized systems of domination (race, sex, national imperialism). These educators question the “covert conservative underpinnings” of official curricula and hierarchical interactions in classrooms. Alongside feminist scholars, hooks decries the classical exclusion of female voices and representation, and finds problematic hierarchical relations

and the exclusive focus on rationality over affectivity. Her social theory rebuts mass media’s portrayal of the feminist movement, affirmative action, and cultural studies as lowering academic standards. She maintains that honoring students’ voices deconstructs the concept of a privileged voice in classrooms. Typically, students from culturally privileged social groups—race, gender, class—tend to dominate class discussions. However, schools should be sites of openness, academic deliberation, and critical consciousness. hooks believes that in order to foster hope rather than cynicism, social critique should include a “constructive focus on resolution.”

hooks’ Conceptualization of Knowledge

Multicultural campaigns in schooling highlight the impact of reinforcing a stoic allegiance to the Columbus myth. The belief in immutable truths in a mainstream curriculum or E.D. Hirsch’s cultural literacy binds schools to a static view of culture and knowledge that ignores ongoing changes in social definitions and practices. More specifically, advocating “basic information” to define intellectual acuity in the modern world, E.D. Hirsch’s series on cultural literacy ignores the cultures, knowledges, and values of historically marginalized groups. Sonia Nieto writes that “According to this narrow view, the basics have in effect already been defined, and knowledge is inevitably European, male, and upper class in origin and conception” (Nieto 2004, 351). On a broader scale, national/cultural celebrations and official curricula portray Christopher Columbus as the hero who valorized “westward expansion” to the exclusion of a broader, more realistic vision of the Americas as well as the Native American experience. The legitimation of so-called Standard American English further reinforces whiteness at the expense of the existing linguistic plurality in the U.S. Banks (1988) noted the linguistic privileging of the white Bostonian Brahmins and derision of the language of poor Blacks in the United States. hooks views Standard American English as the language of conquest and domination. She encourages classroom discourse that is not mono-cultural. Fostering classroom engagement across cultural groups undermines the central focus on “teaching bourgeois manners” (hooks 2003b, 45). It is ironic that U.S. society commends college students from privileged white homes for going to third world countries to study Spanish or Swahili, yet undermines bilingual education. Schools do not give extra credit to Latino students for bilingual facility, although language versatility is a competitive advantage across the nation and the world.

It is our responsibility as subjects of history to question and revise existing beliefs and practices for a more comprehensive reality. For instance, despite the emergence of accounts like Ivan Van Sertima’s *They Came Before Columbus* or popular movies like *Amistad* that “offer radically different understanding of the role played by Africans in the so-called new world, most citizens continue to believe that African-American history begins with slavery” (hooks 2004b, 1-2). Few students know the contributions of Mexican American women like Emma Tenayuca, Luisa Moreno, and Josefina Fierro de Bright to the unionization of agricultural workers in the 1930s and 1940s. Social activists like Frida Kahlo and Emma Goldman remain on the margins of mainstream art culture. The muralist Judith Baca’s project on the *Great Wall* offers stories of Japanese internment camps, the relocation of Chavez ravine, the dust bowl farmers, the Civil Rights Movement, and more (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). If not in our classrooms, where should students learn these facts?

Teachers at the primary, secondary, and even college level are trained to impart “facts,” rather than foster critical consciousness or honor diversity (hooks 1994b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). Acknowledging that factual transmission is better

sited to the so-called hard-sciences than the humanities, hooks calls for a multidimensional perspective that addresses racism, sexism, and classism. Society has the “choice between a memory that justifies and privileges domination, oppression, and exploitation and one that exalts and affirms reciprocity, community and mutuality” (hooks 1994a, 202). While traditional classroom styles favor rote learning of facts, progressive classrooms foster students’ critical consciousness regarding existing structures. This awareness motivates concrete changes in everyday life. The recovery of subjugated knowledge of cultural, feminist, or Black studies constitutes an academic insurrection that subverts the hegemony of a patriarchal white-imperialist dominator structure by crediting the contributions of non-white groups. This process expands the existing canon. The focus on rationality and a myopic individualism, however, fosters disconnected, uncaring individuals in an already alienating society rather than caring human beings of character.

Linking Theory to Practice

hooks believes that theory provides a context for individual struggles and hopes. Blacks need to understand their subjugation and subordination beyond the merely emotional (reductive) reaction that Rev. Al Sharpton exemplifies. Rev. Sharpton, hooks argues, focuses on “White supremacy... (but) does not actively incorporate critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia in his ideological project” (hooks & West 1991, 94). In contrast, some European scholars such as Foucault, Kristeva, Derrida, Lacan, and Third World scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha help “illuminate and enhance” the Black struggle. Furthermore, hooks asserts that Marxism helps explain the commodification of life and peoples by capitalism and stresses the need to redress unequal resources, wealth, and power across the world in the form of revolutionary action (hooks & West 1991). The separation of theory from practice or the lack of critical reflection on reality perpetuates elitism. However, hooks notes that both the dominated and dominating “deny the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness, thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression” (hooks 1994b, 69).

In contrast to the prevailing aura of political neutrality, processes of critical learning should draw upon and interrogate reality for purposes of social change. In linking theory to practice, classrooms become dynamic places where “transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears” (1994b, 195). To highlight the prevalence of racism, hooks instructs students to envision a death and resurrection scenario. For example, would students choose to return as a white male, a white female, a Black female, or a Black male? Most often, students choose to be white males. Rarely do students choose to be Black females. The class then analyzes the political implications of personal choices. In such activities, students learn to question their lives and not merely class texts: “Where our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice” (hooks 1994, 61). In *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*, hooks challenges individuals to continue studying and reading beyond college requirements. The learning experience “enriches life in its entirety. ...It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life” (hooks 2003b, 42-43).

Applying her approach to a wide age-range of students, hooks (2003b) also publishes children’s books and has lectured in the Flint, Michigan, schools about issues that affect the daily lives of children. She writes that:

Teachers of children see gender equality mostly in terms of ensuring that girls get to have the same privileges and rights as boys within the existing social structure; they do not see it in terms of granting boys the same rights as girls—for instance, the right to choose not to engage in aggressive or violent play, the right to play dolls, to play dress up, to wear costumes of either gender, the right to choose. (hooks 2004a, 111)

hooks also runs intensive teacher courses for a number of formal education settings. She sees firsthand the hunger of people to learn in churches, bookstores, homes, and diverse classrooms. This was the initial focus of the feminist movement, to transform consciousness (theory) and impact people’s daily lives (practice). hooks intentionally reaches out to audiences outside the academy to maintain this link. She links hopefulness to an ongoing spirit of resistance even as the powers of injustice threaten to overwhelm individual efforts at transformation. Solidarity ensures a grassroots effort across disciplines, grade levels, the academy, and private and public forums. Consistent with Paulo Freire’s thesis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, hooks (2003b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006; hooks & West 1991) maintains that literacy is a foundation to empowerment.

Student Empowerment

As stated earlier, hooks’ engaged pedagogy argues for a learning community that empowers students and honors forms of cultural diversity that foster joyful as well as meaningful learning experiences. Bureaucracies like schools reward “obedience to authority and keeping to the rules.” Hierarchical teacher/student relations undermine the teaching/learning process. The system subordinates students with limited rights relative to professors who view “themselves as members of a chosen group, a large secret society, elitist and hierarchical, that sets them apart” (hooks 2003b, 22). She recalls the contempt, disdain, shaming, and other forms of psychological abuse suffered by students from those in positions of authority: “Fear, especially fear of betrayal, usually silences the student victims of professional psychological terrorism” (p. 87). Meanwhile, peers or professors accuse the victim of “misinterpreting reality.” On the contrary, incorporating students’ lived experiences helps teachers to create a learning community: “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (hooks 1994b, 8). The integration of a multiplicity of perspectives both enriches and enhances students’ interrogation of subject matter; the process creates a climate of openness to difference as well as the embrace of intellectual rigor. However, such radical approaches to teaching and learning tend to be viewed with suspicion; viewed as therapeutic rather than intellectually stimulating, or even as ethnic cheerleading.

Students take responsibility for learning when teachers recognize their unique contribution to the process. They dialogue with classmates to appreciate a multi-perspective approach to issues, they speculate and try out new positions and entertain alternate views of reality, and the exchange leads to increased class participation and feedback to teachers. The process of dialogical exchange between teacher and student also deconstructs the notion of a privileged voice in classroom settings. For many students, this process builds confidence and reinforces a sense of agency. However, hooks does not ignore the fact that some students select classes purely on the basis that they “fit” their schedule or that they think they can get a good grade in them. The problem is that students often fixate on degrees and compete for good grades rather

than being passionate about education per se. Their interest is not in confronting alternative perspectives through critical consciousness. Building a sense of community, however, requires vigilant awareness of the impact of socialization on individual attitudes and behavior. Binary conceptions of reality (us vs. them) reinforce group oppression and an aversion to difference. In addition, hooks warns that it is important to keep in mind that teachers need time away from classrooms to “perform with excellence and grace” and to avoid the inevitable burn out from a demanding profession (hooks 2003b, 14-15). Being confined to a mandated curriculum and class texts in states like Texas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, coupled with large class sizes and standardized testing, increases the pressure on public school teachers. hooks also encourages teachers to engage in an ongoing evaluation of their teaching to avoid mediocrity and stability. The comfort with familiar practices confines teachers to routines and distaste for passionate or critical classroom exchanges. Learning communities value respect and responsibility in their members (hooks 2003b).

Embracing Multiculturalism

To build market share, capitalist America spearheaded multiculturalism, equipping workers with knowledge of global markets:

Businesses started diversity workshops because the U.S. was losing business in Japan and other places. Unlike the Europeans, white Americans did not know the proper rituals and codes, and they hadn't bothered to really learn them. (hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006, 75)

In empowering individuals of different cultural identities, a multicultural education sensitizes students to the impact of an allegiance to a debilitating status quo while fostering collaboration and solidarity in otherwise alienated environments for most students. The process of critical consciousness begins with envisioning different ways of being, feeling, and knowing. In classrooms, “[a]ccepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?” (hooks 1994b, 40). Thus, affirming ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, gender pluralism, addresses the alienation of formerly marginalized students in school environments. It also helps “recover” formerly sidelined cultural histories and experiences. In hooks’ (2003b) estimation, the difference between her Ivy League and public university students was self-esteem rather than intelligence per se. Public university students, who are typically poor and come from working class backgrounds, have parenting responsibilities and work full-time jobs in addition to attending school, whereas Ivy League students tend to have what could be described as a more traditional college experience with economic support from family, scholarships, or financial institutions. While different, each experience should be integrated into the curriculum and pedagogical theory. Advocating multiculturalism, hooks insists that pluralism is a reality that is inevitable rather than merely a noble intention on the part of good teachers. Despite the flaws of affirmative action implied by works such as Herman Badillo’s *One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed just like Other Immigrant Groups*, that views any concessions towards minorities as condescending, the ensuing diversity compels professors to re-evaluate subject matter and teaching methods (hooks 2003b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006).

Incorporating Passion

The most radical element within hooks’ engaged pedagogy is her call for passion in the classroom. Mundane, boring, and bureaucratic settings contrast sharply with hooks’

(1994b, 2003b) vision of exciting, cooperative, and communal classrooms, long “viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process” (p. 7). She has been ridiculed for being too passionate and emotional (hooks 2003b). The dualistic heritage of Western metaphysics privileges mind over matter as well as public and rational over the private and affective. Teachers interact with students like disembodied minds: “To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professional elders, who have been usually white and male” (p. 191). It “makes us forget then desperately seek to recover ourselves, our feelings, our passion, in some private place—after class” (p. 192). hooks (1994b, 2003b) insists that the seriousness of learning does not come at the expense of pleasure and joy in knowing: “Love in the classroom, prepares teachers and students to open minds and hearts” (hooks 2003b, 137). In college, the focus on the future and its promised rewards fosters “hedonistic materialism and unchecked consumption as the norm” as opposed to the spiritual well-being of learning communities. As a form of self-recovery, love bridges the sense of otherness in a world hostile to spirituality. Reflecting her Buddhist philosophy, hooks encourages full engagement in the moment because the here and now is what is real. Education creates alienation by honoring “only data, logic, analysis, and a systematic disconnect” of self from the world and others (p. 180). An intellectual seeks union of body, mind, and soul.

Another aspect of joyful engagement in the classroom is the acknowledgement of discomfort in addressing contentious social issues like racism, sexism, classism, and imperialism. It counters the traditional denigration of love as crazy, blind, and foolish. In a culture of domination, individuals engage in behaviors contrary to their values and beliefs. hooks warns against the apathy of denial within the Black community regarding the color caste system, incest, and domestic violence (hooks 2001, 2004a/b; hooks & Mesa-Bains 2006). Although intellectuals mock the world of self-help, concrete admonitions compel a reassessment of debilitating and superficial identities. As hooks states: “What we cannot imagine, we cannot bring into being” (hooks 2003b, 195).

Conclusion

hooks’ social and educational theories address the impact of debilitating factors in formal but also informal socialization structures. Indeed, her major corpus of writing centers on personal habits and social factors that undermine human agency. Critical of metaphysical dualisms—mind/body; public/private; rational/affective—including gender, race, and class hierarchies, hooks highlights the interlocking nature of political systems and the pervasive as well as enduring impact of discriminatory structures. Specifically, it is myopic to blame poor Blacks for violence or academic underachievement without acknowledging the impact of the existing “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” on individuals and groups. A nation that valorizes violence, sexuality, and instant gratification more readily creates annihilation and alienation among its populace. It also undermines human agency and an informed consciousness to critique and reform social structures.

Confronting racist subjugation should also address personal accountability and dysfunction in families “that may have little or anything to do with racism” (hooks 2004b, 116). The embrace of debilitating patterns like the color caste hierarchy, substance abuse, consumerism, and domestic violence, undermines a collective cultural identity. Embracing a sense of accountability affirms our being as subjects of history while transforming our belief in possibility. For example, the salvation of Black men lies in self-reflection and the development of self-esteem that

recognizes their sense of agency rather than dwelling on their victimhood. Demonizing the oppressor merely assuages the fear and anxiety of vulnerable individuals and groups. While reality can be despairing, a liberating education is inherently a pedagogy of hope; a belief in people's ability to change. It involves an ongoing radical openness to education and life.

In hooks' view, what is good for Black education is good for the education of all peoples. Education is more than acquiring information to regurgitate back on tests. It involves the acquisition of a body of experiences from students' lived reality. Knowledge should enhance our sense of agency, fostering critical consciousness and commitment to social transformation in personal as well as communal relations. Such an education exposes conventional definitions of reality and identity while challenging individuals to collective well-being. Social, political, and economic change can occur with critical awareness and transformation of debilitating habits to addressing institutional biases. This constitutes the ultimate resistance to lingering perceptions of ineptitude reinforced by mass media and the capitalist patriarchal white supremacist political systems of domination. That hooks' transgressive educational theory is a demanding and overarching process should motivate rather than compel us back to a regressive, bureaucratic, pervasive sense of victimhood, particularly among minority groups waiting for Godot.

hooks' call for individual and collective responsibility reflects Marxist undertones of mass enlightenment as opposed to ideological or unrealistic expectations. Her consistent critique of metaphysical dualisms in the Western intellectual tradition, however, discounts an either/or worldview or solutions to social issues. Recent calls for reparations by some Blacks reflect earlier campaigns for desegregation—in schools and society—presuming an end or cure all of racism from some governmental policy. W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the talented tenth suffers a similar flaw. A few Blacks made it into the "White" club; fewer still looked back. Black people's access to predominantly white institutions appears short-sighted in this regard. What to do?

hooks addresses the issue of marginality at the conceptual and practical levels: definitions and transformation of reality. A comprehensive understanding and critique of Black people's plight involves an appreciation of socio-historical circumstances shaping cultural identities. Further still, such identities are rarely monolithic as myopic stereotypes of cultural groups suggest. In schools, honoring cultural diversity must of necessity contextualize the origins of difference and its impact on individual self-understanding and choices. Since schools provide a common cultural experience and forum for exploring personal and national identities, it is here that change can begin. The issue, however, hooks insists, isn't individual vs. collective interests; reflexivity vs. talking back; instructional vs. individual complicity in maintaining discrimination; Black male vs. Black female interests. Regardless of the players, privilege or bias affects one and all—in Freirean terms, the oppressor and oppressed alike. Self-awareness and individual progress or parochialism and bias impact individual choices whose influence reverberate across neighborhoods, cities, and nation states, each situation involving choice and responsibility. Each of us is either part of the problem or the solution, regardless of our station in life: parent, child, teacher, student, politician, corporate worker, writer, or preacher, etc. In particular, although shaped by circumstances sometimes beyond our control, to depict students or the marginalized as "down trodden holy innocents" denies their sense of agency and responsibility for transforming self and society. Looking back to *bell hooks Engaged Pedagogy: A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness*, more than

a decade later, hooks' corpus of writing still "poses the arduous task of continual reflection and action on an individual as well as collective level" (p. 227). Furthermore, since personal or institutional redress of marginality is always limited in time and space, a commitment to equality for all involves ongoing and grassroots efforts at social change. This is revolutionary thinking; pragmatic but also visionary.

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“Killing Rage”: Meditations of an Angry White Female

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During a recent excursion into the “Politics” section of my local bookstore, a book entitled *The Professors* drew my eye. I was instantly intrigued by the provocative subtitle: *The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. As I flipped through the book, I was surprised and delighted to find that many of my top intellectual heroes made the list: Michael Eric Dyson, Gayle Rubin, Cornel West, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and, of course, bell hooks. I quickly flipped to the section on bell hooks, anxious to find out what, in author David Horowitz’s estimation, makes her such a threat to the American system of higher education. After talking uneasily about hooks’ emphasis on “‘patriarchy’ and race and class ‘hierarchies,’” Horowitz quotes the first sentence of hooks’ volume of collected essays, *Killing Rage*, as evidence that she is a menace to academia.¹ hooks’ opening sentence reads, “I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder.”² Horowitz returns to this sentence later in his section on hooks, writing that “the inspiration for this malice was nothing more heinous than the occupation of an airline seat.”³ He dismisses the incident that gave rise to hooks’ “killing rage,” calling it an “innocent contretemps” that should not be irrationally attributed to “white racism.”⁴

Despite hooks’ vast body of writing on race, class, gender, and sexuality, it is not surprising that Horowitz should single out hooks’ work on the concept of killing rage. In fact, in her essay entitled “Killing Rage: Militant Resistance,” hooks addresses the discomfort with—indeed, intolerance for—black rage. She writes, “To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and a part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism.”⁵ Despite the danger inherent in expressing rage in the face of white racism, hooks insists on the importance of rage in relationship to antiracist struggle. In fact, I read her as saying that we cannot effectively transform our racist society *without* rage.

As a white person, it is difficult indeed to read “Killing Rage” without a profound sense of discomfort. Immediately following the notorious first line of the essay, hooks outlines the situation that is the impetus for her killing rage. hooks and her traveling companion K had upgraded their airline seats to first class, but K was given the wrong boarding pass by the airline employees. K was called to the front of the plane by the flight attendants who “accuse[d] her of trying to occupy a seat in first class that is not assigned to her.”⁶ The flight attendants were more concerned that the white male with the appropriate boarding pass could have a seat in first class than they were about K’s comfort. The white man took the seat next to hooks, apologizing to K while she removed her bag and moved to a seat in coach. hooks writes, “I stare him down with rage, tell him that I do not want to hear his liberal apologies, his repeated insistence that ‘it was not his fault.’”⁷ This incident occurred after a series of events in which hooks and K were treated discourteously for no apparent reason—apart from their black femaleness. The first time I read hooks’ essay, I struggled to understand how the airplane incident triggered such intense anger in her. Irritation, I could understand. But *killing rage*? It was, after all, not the white man’s fault. Why not be angry with the airline employees rather than a man who seemingly had nothing to do with the situation? My discomfort intensified as hooks viscerally described her anger:

“I felt a ‘killing rage.’ I wanted to stab him softly, to shoot him with the gun I wished I had in my purse. And as I watched his pain, I would say to him tenderly, ‘racism hurts.’”⁸ In my many subsequent readings of this essay, I have found myself skimming over this part, wanting to sympathize with hooks, yet profoundly disturbed by her vivid description of killing a man who seemingly had very little to do with the situation. Because my mind has been colonized by white supremacist culture, I find it a struggle to hear hooks’ rage.

hooks points out that “black rage continues to be represented as always and only evil and destructive.”⁹ But for her, rage is a refusal to be victimized. When she feels rage, she is not a passive object being acted upon by white oppressors. Instead, she is an active *subject*. Black rage is so dangerous to white supremacist society because it is through rage that the oppressed may assert their personhood. Toni Morrison hints at the healing power of rage in her novel *The Bluest Eye* when she suggests that Pecola Breedlove, “the dehumanized colonized little black girl,” might be saved if she could allow herself to feel anger.¹⁰ Morrison writes, “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth.”¹¹ Anger acknowledges that things are not as they should be, and that Pecola deserves to be treated as a person, not an object. George Yancy writes, “[Pecola’s] feeling of anger confirms that she experiences the world from an existential *here*. Her anger functions as a kind of a posteriori proof that *she is. I’m angry, ergo I am.*”¹² Such an assertion of subjectivity is unsettling to a racist social order that depends on the perception of black people as less-than-human. Delegitimizing the black assertion of subjectivity through rage also forecloses the possibility of “the mutuality of a subject-to-subject encounter” between black people and white people.¹³

Because rage is so important to the development of black subjectivity, hooks argues against those who attempt to reduce black rage to something else, something problematic. For example, black rage is routinely pathologized in contemporary American society. As a result, both blacks and whites find it extremely difficult to let rage be rage. I was recently part of a Pittsburgh consciousness raising group in which white community members worked to educate themselves on the issue of racism in the U.S. and to understand their complicity in the perpetuation of racial oppression. When the group read “Killing Rage,” most of us attempted to deal with our discomfort caused by hooks’ unapologetic intensity by collapsing her rage with love. It seemed to us that rage was okay as long as one only feels it briefly. Then the anger should give way to a desire to lovingly relate to all human beings. One member of the group pointed to a passage in hooks’ essay where she insists that rage cannot be conflated with any other feeling or concept. Rage, argues hooks, should be allowed to stand on its own. The group member received nothing but blank stares. We then resumed our discussion about love.

hooks takes issue with Cornel West’s linkage of rage with “great love for black people” in an essay on Malcolm X’s rage.¹⁴ hooks writes, “[West] does not link that rage to a passion for justice that may not emerge from the context of great love. By collapsing Malcolm’s rage and his love, West attempts to explain that rage away, to temper it.”¹⁵ Linking rage with a positive concept such as love makes it more palatable, less frightening. It is an attempt to render rage more “acceptable” to a white supremacist society that insists upon pathologizing it. But hooks is clear that rage is powerful in ways that love is not. Rage highlights the need for justice *right now* with an urgency that love may not provide. It can also supply the energy needed for transformative struggle. hooks’ own rage on the airplane gave her the motivation “to take pen in hand and write in the heat

of that moment.”¹⁶ Rage opens up the possibility of resistance, of the refusal to be complicit despite the discomfort inevitably caused by an unwillingness to be silenced.

Because black rage can provide the impetus for revolutionary change, it must be pathologized in order to maintain white privilege. We witnessed the dismissal of black rage quite recently with the controversy surrounding Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama’s former pastor. Wright’s rage over racism in the U.S. was repeatedly denounced as “unpatriotic,” “divisive,” “destructive,” and “inflammatory” despite the fact that he routinely spoke the truth about racial oppression. Not only does Wright present a picture of America that white people do not want to see, he is *angry*. Most white Americans find his unapologetic passion profoundly disturbing. Because of the revolutionary potential of such anger, it was important that key sound bites from Wright’s sermons (such as “God damn America”) be stripped of their context in order to make it easier for the media to paint him as a raving lunatic. The pathologization of Wright’s rage excused white Americans from having to hear his rage and foreclosed any discussion of the continuing relevance of racism. Wright’s rage was further delegitimized when Obama denounced Wright, severing his connection with his former pastor in order to save his presidential campaign. In Obama’s famous speech on race in the midst of the Wright controversy, he takes up the “problem” of black rage. In an attempt to explain away the anger in Rev. Wright’s sermons, Obama states, “That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African American community in our condition, and prevents the African American community from forging alliances it needs to bring about real change.”¹⁷ The picture of black rage Obama paints for us here is quite different from the description of rage bell hooks gives to us. For Obama, rage is a “distraction”; it deflects attention from the responsibility the black community should take for their “complicity” in their own oppression. But for hooks, feeling anger and expressing rage during the airplane incident was precisely what prevented her from being complicit in racist oppression. Her rage gave her the impetus to speak out, to take a stand. She writes, “All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity. What does our rage at injustice mean if it can be silenced...?”¹⁸ To keep herself from feeling rage and thus remain silent, as white supremacist society has carefully taught her to do, is itself an act of complicity. hooks is also clear that rage, far from keeping the black community from forging transformative alliances, is what provides the proper conditions for political solidarity. Rage demands that black people recognize themselves as subjects. The enraged person will also accept no less than recognition as a subject by others. White people must recognize the personhood of black people in order to forge bonds of political solidarity resulting in transformative revolutionary action. This cannot happen until white people can hear black rage. So black people need not—and indeed, *should* not—stop feeling/expressing rage. It is white people who need to learn to hear black rage and acknowledge its legitimacy.

I cannot learn to hear black rage until I acknowledge the pathology of white supremacist culture. In “Beyond Black Rage: Ending Racism,” hooks writes, “Public focus on black rage, the attempt to trivialize and dismiss it, must be subverted by public discourse about the pathology of white supremacy, the madness it creates.”¹⁹ In a Foucaultian move, hooks points to the necessity of taking the focus off of black rage as an object of knowledge, often looked at from a white perspective, and make whiteness the object of scrutiny instead. White supremacist culture usually escapes critical examination, even though that

culture is where the real pathology lies. hooks writes, “White supremacy is frightening. It promotes mental illness and various dysfunctional behaviors on the part of whites and non-whites. It is the real and present danger—not black rage.”²⁰ The more I reflect on my whiteness, the more the “dysfunctional behaviors” of white supremacist culture reveal themselves to me. As a white person, I engage in dysfunctional behaviors on a daily basis. I participate in a whole legacy of American racism as I increase my walking speed during a stroll down the street because I am painfully conscious that there are two young black men walking behind me. I cannot stop an icy ball of fear from forming in my stomach. This is the pathological behavior I struggle to unlearn. This is the mental illness engendered in me through daily life in white supremacist culture. This is the real madness.

As I reflect on pathological white supremacist culture, I finally begin to ask myself the question, “*Where is my rage?*” While it is important to hear black rage and recognize it as legitimate after the long white legacy of dismissing and pathologizing it, white people need to go a step beyond listening and get angry. Their own experience of rage can supply the fuel for antiracist struggle. The incident on the airplane might have been different had the white man felt enraged at the way the black women were being treated. hooks even pointed out to him “that he knew no white man would have been called on the loudspeaker to come to the front of the plane while another white male took his seat—a fact he never disputed.”²¹ The racism and sexism in the situation was fairly clear and the white man chose to ignore it and repeatedly insist that “it was not his fault.”²² It eventually dawned on me that, while the white man appeared not to bear any responsibility for this incident, it was his complicity that angered hooks. Silent complicity is what allows white supremacist culture to thrive. Had the situation engendered *his* rage, he could have taken a stand against injustice, thus momentarily disrupting the vicious cycle of racism and sexism in America. According to Tim Wise, whose most recent book is significantly entitled *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections from an Angry White Male*, white Americans must make a choice “between collaboration and resistance, silence and protest, complacency and agitation. It is the choice between accepting the way things are or insisting, indeed demanding, that we can and must do better.”²³ Rage at oppression can provide white people with the impetus and energy needed for choosing resistance, protest, and agitation.

As Sonia Kruks suggests, I can “feel-with” bell hooks in her painful experience of racism. The experience of “feeling-with” someone who suffers can act as a catalyst for rage. “Feeling-with” does not mean that we “reduce them to passive victim status nor to mere objects of sympathy, or even pity.”²⁴ “Feeling-with” also acknowledges the specificity of the other’s pain. hooks’ experience of racism can produce an affective response in me as I listen to her story and attempt to “enter imaginatively” into her world.²⁵ Because of the effect that white supremacist culture has had on me, I may have to imaginatively enter into hooks’ world several times before I can even begin to feel the extent of her pain. Even as I “feel-with” hooks, I recognize that her pain, and my pain engendered by her experience of pain, are two very different things. I cannot pretend that her pain is my pain. But “feeling-with” acknowledges that hooks’ pain concerns me and that “we are connected” through a shared bond of sentience.²⁶

“Feeling-with” produces its own experience of rage. As I revisit “Killing Rage” time and time again, and increasingly learn to “feel-with” hooks as she suffers from racism, I feel my own rage grow. And indeed, I am angry. I am angry that

racism is a part of so many people's daily lives. I am angry that black women can be so readily pushed aside so that white men might be comfortable or in cases where white women live comfortable lives off the backs of black women. I am angry that I am expected to be complicit in the perpetuation of racial inequality and oppression on a daily basis. And I am angry that white people so often do not choose resistance. This rage provides the momentum for my resistance, protest, and agitation. Indeed, it might even be argued that rage itself is an act of resistance.²⁷ Like Tim Wise, I hope to "speak treason fluently," but as an "angry white female" who hears black rage and can "feel-with" those who suffer from the pain of racism.

Endnotes

1. David Horowitz. *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2006), 223.
2. bell hooks, quoted in Horowitz, *The Professors*, 223.
3. Horowitz, *The Professors*, 224.
4. Horowitz, *The Professors*, 224.
5. bell hooks. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Owl Books, 1995), 14.
6. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 8.
7. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 8-9.
8. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 11.
9. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 19.
10. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 12.
11. Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1994), 50.
12. George Yancy. *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 187.
13. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 18.
14. Cornel West, quoted in hooks, *Killing Rage*, 13.
15. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 13.
16. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 19.
17. Barack Obama. "A More Perfect Union," Constitution Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 18, 2008.
18. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 19.
19. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 30.
20. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 30.
21. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 9.
22. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 9.
23. Tim Wise. *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections From an Angry White Male* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 355.
24. Sonia Kruks. *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 160.
25. Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 172.
26. Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 175.
27. I would like to thank George Yancy for this insight.

Teaching to Love, Teaching to Transgress: Reading¹ bell hooks

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Collectively, black people and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination. 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.

—bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

To educate a man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

What makes bell hooks singular (in importance and significance) as a scholar/thinker is not so much her emphasis on love as a site of personal and institutional transformation. The notion that love is the source of personal and institutional transformation has been theorized and argued on a number of fronts from a number of disciplinary approaches.² As such, the part of hooks' conception of love that emphasizes the importance and necessity of love (as an abstract concept, such as loving the other) as part of our daily American life and in our intellectual institutions is not new, nor is the subversiveness that it carries with it.³ What makes hooks' conception and usage of love unique and significant is her emphasis on a specific kind of love; the emphasis she places on loving blackness is what makes her work remarkable. While it is part of our contemporary liberal lexicon to *value* others in their otherness, to place diversity (as a concept and a practice) at the "center"⁴ of the matrix of values, it is not diversity per se that hooks values, nor is it humanity or some ephemeral, ethereal conception of the human person and human dignity, but something very specific—historical if you will—with its own contours and edges. hooks argues that what we need to value and to love as an American society—for our transcendence, for our rebirth, for the possibility of our own possibility—is blackness. This is a remarkable claim, and a remarkable place to begin theory. hooks begins her theory of love and value with that which is most unloved and most undervalued: blackness. Her point of departure regarding blackness is not simply one that signifies the importance of liminality or marginality. Her placement of blackness as the "center" of value and love is genuine.⁵ It is a genuine argument about how the American nation and each of us as individuals within the nation can begin to rethink our nation and ourselves and how to make each better. hooks challenges us to reconstitute and resignify our horizons, offering the loving and valuing of blackness as a concrete "horizontal" change to reshape our own being-in-the-world.

Loving blackness and confronting the (read: our) denial and devaluation of it is more important for hooks than it is to confront whiteness and white people in their whiteness—that is, their whiteness being-in-the-world.⁶ It is instructive here to take a look at hooks' text *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, especially the chapter entitled "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," to hear and read hooks on precisely this point. hooks, following

theologian James Cone's text, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, writes:

...the logic of white supremacy would be radically undermined if everyone would learn to identify with and love blackness...he [James Cone] 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.⁷

On hooks' reading, de-centering whiteness is but a consequence of loving blackness. The emphasis, then, shifts as the horizon alters and we realize that it is not whiteness that needs to change, but our attitude towards blackness. In recounting a classroom experience of reading Nella Larson's *Passing*, hooks suggests the lead character in the novel, Clare, committed murder not to sustain her passing for white, but so she could affirm her blackness. hooks comments that the class gave no response:

I asked them to consider the possibility that to love blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture. ...It became painfully obvious by the lack of response that this group of diverse students (many of them were black people) were more interested in discussing the desire of black folks to be white, indeed were fixated on the issue. So much so that they could not even take seriously a critical discussion about "loving blackness."⁸

Shifting the "horizontal" emphasis from whiteness and the problems it causes—for both black and white persons—hooks enters into race theory (and the race for theory) with a narrative that denies its counter-narration status vis-à-vis a presumed center. She is and her work is, as Nina Simone says in her song "Mississippi Goddamn," a show-tune without a show; she poses the question of loving blackness without the necessary point, counter-point structure which permeates so much of race theory. And, unlike very many theories of race which "center" whiteness even as they seek to de-center whiteness—most critical whiteness does just this; it begins and ends next to Otto Neurath, on his boat, never having left his side—hooks does not argue that in our social and intellectual spaces what we need is confrontation. For hooks we don't need to confront the invisibility and omnipresence of whiteness (as norm). And because she does not begin from this place, her dialogical method, of placing our (American and Western) situation into the clearing to examine how we live with one another, does not seek to create safe places for whites to express themselves, but a safe place where blackness can be loved and valued. The resultant force of this dialogical move, though, is in the destabilizing of whiteness—yet this is only a consequence, and not the main goal. It is from this perspective of contour and edge analysis of blackness that we can come to love one another, for white racism—in social and intellectual spaces—is not the problem; rather, it is the devaluation of blackness that is the problem.

As a social theorist, hooks is extraordinarily prescient in her analysis. She does not simply reverse the order of the discourse to place the "center" at the margin and the margin at the "center." Rather, she makes it her point to disentangle one from the other. The grandness of her work is not to center blackness as we de-center whiteness. This is not her point, but a consequence of the real source of theory itself—to uncover our reasons for the problems we face as a nation, namely, we are uncomfortable with blackness. And our discomfort sneaks

upon us in our overemphasis upon dealing with whites—their problems and the problems they cause—and not enough time dealing with the fact that if we valued and loved blackness it would not matter what whites did nor what they said.⁹ For example, in her text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks does not spend as much effort in unmasking the whiteness of feminism as she does making a case for what black women have to offer white feminism. In this way, she ends up criticizing white feminism, but we should make sure to note the difference, that is, whiteness is not centered, nor is the margin sought to be centered; in fact, there is no "center." Rather, the value and love of blackness is the *focus*. Reading hooks in this way is instructive given her works on love—*All About Love: New Visions*, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, *Salvation: Black People and Love*—and continuing interest in love, especially black love, in her other works.

Toni Morrison, in her novel *Bluest Eye*, makes a similar claim about loving and valuing blackness in her depiction of the life (and tragedy) of her lead character Pecola Breedlove: a black and "ugly" girl whose self-identity is mediated through the hatred others have of her and her blackness. In the last substantive chapter in the novel, Morrison writes of our relationship to Pecola:

We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her.¹⁰

Again, Morrison notes:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. All of our beauty, which was hers first and she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. ...We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.¹¹

Once more:

...we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, only polite; not good, but well behaved.¹²

Morrison captures the elements of the problem inherent with Pecola Breedlove. The point is that we do not love, nor do we value blackness, and because she is, for us, blackest of all—in physical color, in the markers of vulnerability, and in the metaphysical fact that she reflects (read: discloses) totally who we are to ourselves—she is hated most, hated best, and valued least. As the blackest character of the novel—both literally and metaphorically—we see her existence in the novel as a challenge—to who we are and how we see ourselves—and her story as one of fundamental loss. What makes Pecola's life a tragedy is the fact that it could have been avoided. Morrison tells us through the tragedy of Pecola that we failed her because we were selfish, never stopping to think it was us that never really mattered, but Pecola. Morrison warns us of this when she writes, "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly..."¹³ To this I will add selfish people love selfishly. Love, it seems for Morrison, is about getting over ourselves long enough to care for another, which none of the characters in the novel were capable of doing; what white feminism does not do for bell hooks; what black and white people do not do with regards to blackness. What matters about Pecola and her life is not what we think of ourselves and what we did to Pecola, though this is instructive for thinking about how we might be better people, what matters, rather, is that Pecola has been shaped by our

own problems. What matters is that Pecola has been ruined. And, regardless if we have problems or not, what matters is not our own strivings, but those of Pecola. For it is in her and from her that love must emerge. It is not the center which matters most, nor the margin, but loosening one from the other such that we can actually love and value one another. If not, Pecola will find love somewhere: perhaps in madness. Yet, the tragic irony of Pecola is that even in madness she is conflicted; even in a world she constructs and narrates she finds resistance to love. Love's lack has created a vacuum filled with a specific kind of created madness. Pecola's madness is in the form of an internal conversation externalized, wherein the self speaks to the self as a third party. But this third party, too, refuses to love and value Pecola.

I guess you're right. And Cholly could make anybody do anything.

He could not.

He made you didn't he?

Shut up!

I was only teasing.

Shut up!

O.K. O.K.

He just tried, see? He didn't do anything. You hear me?

*I'm shutting up.*¹⁴

Can we imagine what Pecola's life would be if she were loved and valued? I think Morrison's novel invites us to do such an imagining. But, we are not to pity Pecola, nor are we to scorn the other characters. We are to find, to locate, perhaps even create a space, a place where Pecola could be valued and loved. She had to find value and love in herself in a secondary voice (a third party). As one can see in the exchange itself, though, even that was difficult for her to achieve.

If we were to value and love blackness, and thus value and love her, what the hell difference would it make what a white person either thought or said? On this score, would black people themselves have mimicked the behavior of white people at all? Nevertheless, what is at issue for Morrison is Pecola. If we were to love and value her, what else would really matter? hooks, in focusing her discourse on loving blackness, then, takes what is ontologically passive and makes it active. Blackness, to borrow a term from Frantz Fanon's epigraph, becomes *actional*. Though it receives action—love and value from others—it does so actively by valuing and loving itself, engaging the other rather than being the passive recipient.

For this transformation of horizon in which blackness becomes actional, what is needed, for hooks, is a resignification of blackness itself. It is not enough to simply rethink or react our relations to blackness. What we need, for hooks, is a shift in the semiotic ground from which our significations themselves emerge. hooks theorizes the process of this shift in a number of ways in her text *Teaching to Transgress*. In the text she articulates the process in specific terms of the academic classroom space as a site for personal and social transformation, engaging in theories of the erotic¹⁵ as well as linguistic analysis. And, while the former (the erotic) fits well with her theory of love, the latter is also necessary for a horizontal (read: epistemic) shift. In her chapter, "Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words," hooks confronts the problem of self-expression for

marginalized folk. Reflecting on Adrienne Rich's work, hooks poses the difficult question of expressing oneself in a language that "belongs"¹⁶ to one's oppressor.

I imagine them [newly arrived African slaves to the American continent] hearing the spoken English as the oppressor's language, yet I imagined them also realizing this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance. I imagine that the moment they realized the oppressor's language, seized and spoken by the tongues of the colonized, could be a space of bonding was joyous. For in that recognition was the understanding that intimacy could be restored, that a culture of resistance could be formed that would make recovery from the trauma of enslavement possible.¹⁷

In possessing the language of the oppressor, making it, in a deep sense, *mine* opened the horizontal world of being black on to them. Not only could "black folks...find again a way to make community"¹⁸ but they could also forge new ways of being-in-the-world, removing themselves from an in-itself (*en-soi*) to a for-itself (*por-soi*). The "capture" of language, for hooks offered newly arrived slaves political possibilities because in capturing language "intimacy could be restored"; meaning and love (or eros) as the foundation of relationality could be restored. "Like desire, language," hooks writes, "disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body."¹⁹ Language allows us to signify the world, which *is* our relational or horizontal being in the world. As we have learned from philosopher Martin Heidegger, "language is a way we exist in the world and a way of having access to it, to what he calls world-formation."²⁰ This becomes especially important in hooks' work. In re-signifying blackness we must love, desire, and value it, which means reconstructing our discourse regarding it. And, as we reconstruct our discourse, we work to reconstruct the world. Yet, as philosopher Merleau-Ponty tells us, it is not enough to reconstruct the world—for the world is a place of an always already meaning which precedes us individually—what we need to reconstruct is the earth itself. For Merleau-Ponty, the earth is a place of pre-linguistics, pre-signification, pre-individuation where meaning itself is constructed. hooks' usage of eros and the erotic is similar to this idea. In her usage, eros or the erotic is not located in language, but in that metaphysical place of connectedness between ourselves and other, ourselves and the world. It is a place where meanings are constructed; meanings that we come to use and actualize in our social, political, and economic dealings. In western capitalist and patriarchal societies, the meanings constructed are of blackness as a fundamental problem. It is for this reason that simply talking about blackness or illuminating whiteness is not enough for hooks. What she calls for is a transformation of our world, our horizons, which begins with a transformation of the earth into a space where blackness can be loved and valued.²¹ For hooks, contemporary rap music does just this. She writes:

It is absolutely essential that the revolutionary power of black vernacular speech not be lost in contemporary culture. That power resides in the capacity of black vernacular to intervene on the boundaries and limitations of standard English.

In contemporary black popular culture, rap music has become one of the spaces where black vernacular speech is used in a manner that invites dominant mainstream culture to listen—to hear—and, to some extent, be transformed.²²

Rap music, for hooks, allows for a space to be opened up, or to be burrowed under, where language itself is re-thought, and meanings are re-signified. “I MC,” rapper Mos Def matter-of-factly says in his song, “Love,” from his 1999 solo album *Black On Both Sides*,²³ “which means I must *cultivate the earth*.” Notice that Mos incorporates both the concept of love and the concept of cultivating the earth with the idea of being an MC—generally translated as master of ceremony, but what Mos calls “making contact.” Mos, like hooks, connects the idea that love, the reconstruction of language, and “making contact”—what hooks calls the eros or the erotic—are all necessary components for transforming, or cultivating the earth—the pre-linguistic space of meaning construction.

Mos further raps about the process through which the earth becomes cultivated: “Back straight backs, hard beats and hard work/I be the funky drummer to soften the hard earth.”²⁴ Mos offers us not only a phenomenological understanding of how a space that was once hostile to blackness can be transformed into a place where blackness thrives—in the beats, in the lyrics—but he also gives us an existential, one might say metaphysical, narrative of the process by which one’s will can be inserted into a space to reshape it fundamentally, to give it a new “essence.” Mos Def reminds us by the title of the song, “Love,” that: “My folks said they was in love when they made me/I take the love they made me wit to make rhymes and beats.”²⁵ Rhymes and beats; the place where blackness thrives, where black love resides; where the earth is given a new shape. The hard beats of which Mos speaks are prior to language and its signification in lyrics: “Speech *in line* with the rhythm, designed *with* the rhythm.”²⁶ Speech is in line and designed *with* the rhythm; speech is not dictated by the rhythm itself, but follows an already laid out landscape, placing the pre-linguistic reality into linguistic discourse. Beats and rhythm work to re-shape the earth; work to alter the space through which the basic meanings of our linguistic world can be *re-signified*. Blackness loved, desired, valued.

In shaping the earth with his own black voice, Mos reshapes the narrative of blackness, placing his “belief in the promise” that the emergence of a transgressive space will not simply love, value, and desire him, but will in fact *look* like him. “Shook up the world [le monde], like Ali in 6-3 [1963]/We reaching a height you said could not be/We bringing the light you said we can’t see/Saw the new day coming, it looked just like me.”²⁷ The world as a place where we exist as human beings, an always already signified place, for Mos, has already been transformed with blackness loved, desired, valued, when he claims that the new day—of re-signified blackness—will look just like him. Mos offers us a moment in which our signifiers are altered, are re-shifted, which for hooks means an alteration of our horizon so that black people are not simply included, as it were, into whiteness, but the manner in which we signify blackness itself will be altered. Blackness loved, desired, valued. For Mos Def, and I would add for bell hooks as well, notions of the earth as *la terre*—a space of pre-linguistic articulation—takes on an ironic and complex meaning.²⁸ For a black subject born out of the history of American slavery, notions of “banging the world into shape” or “cultivating the earth” are very ironic indeed. The same two black hands that tended to the land and allowed it to bear its fruit, that fed and nursed the same white infants who would in turn legislate effectively against them, are the *same* two black hands that cultivate the earth for change, that bang away at the world like a skilled blacksmith to give birth to a new earth, a new (re)signification of blackness and of humanity. The same two black hands that once caused derision and scorn, flight from desire into fantasy in a transformative moment of love *create* the space for a new love, a new desire, and a new value. bell hooks,

like Mos Def, like Toni Morrison, seeks to re-signify blackness and to create a space where blackness can be re-signified, a place of love, desire, and value for blackness.

hooks, like Mos Def, works to re-signify blackness as something lovable, desirable, and valuable through the work of tilling the fields of hardened earth, working through the subaltern²⁹ to recreate us fundamentally, wholly. Like the rocked soul in the bosom of Abraham blackness thus re-signified and re-named becomes a space of love and value and a place for social as well as personal transformation.

Endnotes

1. Reading, following the Freirian model, is an act of critical engagement. Reading, in this sense, is a form of critical engagement, not solely with a *text* as written word, but in the sense of the being of the text. In this sense, reading takes on a critical role of analyzing the world itself—social institutions, social relations, popular culture, politics, and economics.
2. The importance of the concept of “love” in American social and political thought in the post-Civil Rights era cannot be overstated. In an era where our collective “future” as a nation is uncertain, feelings of uneasiness and inadequacy over the issues of identity, democratic practices, diversity, plurality, multiculturalism, and political correctness continue to grow. As we cling to the principles of liberal theory—respect for the person, individual rights—to ground our democratic theory, what we expect from one another as citizens becomes even less clear. This is witnessed in the uncertainty of our intellectual direction. Some theorists signal the need for a cosmopolitan self-conception where we would all be citizens of the world and our identity as the nation would collapse. For an example of this kind of work see: Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2007); Julia Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993). Others signal for an end to racial politics, while not giving up nationalist politics. For them, what is necessary is a renewed understanding of America’s democratic principles and a new appreciation for the diversity of the American nation. For an example of this kind of work see: Shelby Steele, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007). Others still call for a new sense of democratic friendship where we would not retain our nationalist identity, nor would we have to acquire a new cosmopolitan sense of existence. Rather, we would relate to one another as brothers (and sisters). This fraternal conception of social relations would be a new way of political dealing. For an example of this kind of work see: Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v Board of Education* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). The concept of love permeates all of these texts, as we try to figure out our own hearts and our collective history. bell hooks’ work on politics and her conception of the role of love in our nation fits none of these trends.
3. One can see such a reading in the Christian (read: non-violent) writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. The problem with this reading—love as an abstract quality of the soul expressed through a care and concern for the nameless other—is that it doesn’t truly engage the epistemological assumptions inherent in it, namely, liberal humanism. If one were not to read King as a liberal humanist, then, the discourse of love in his work would be radically transformed, as God’s love in the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament. Similarly, given hooks’ own affinity to Paulo Friere it is difficult to theorize her conception of love in generic or abstract terms. Rather, when hooks speaks of love there is always some political and epistemological end in terms of which she aims—namely, the resuscitation of blackness to a place of desire, love, and value.
4. I use quotation marks around the word center because I argue later that the discourse of center and margin is negated

- in hooks' work. "Center" here then signifies the traditional usage of the term.
5. The singular unifying thread in her corpus is loving and valuing, but not as a general principle of human engagement, but specifically in terms of blackness. What makes this insight profound is the idea that in loving and valuing blackness we can love and value one another, given that blackness is at the "center" of American identity. This is what makes hooks an interesting thinker; she blends her own insights with those of Toni Morrison (especially from *Playing in the Dark*), Ralph Ellison (especially *Invisible Man*), Richard Wright (especially *Black Boy*), Nella Larson (especially *Passing*), among others with her own subjectivity, alterity, difference, and change. See hooks' collection of works: *We Real Cool*; *Teaching to Transgress*; and *Black Feminism: From Margin to Center* as examples of this.
 6. Here, it is instructive to look at chapter one, "The Elevator Effect," from George Yancy's text *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). In it Yancy offers us a sober analysis as well as extensive footnotes on the problem of whiteness as epistemic horizon and what it means to live whitely in the world.
 7. bell hooks. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 1996), 151.
 8. hooks, *Killing Rage*, 147.
 9. This, of course, is an epistemological claim and not one about the power structure and wealth inequality in a racist, patriarchic society. The claim being made is that many race theorists focus on the psychological elements of lived race rather than the structural nature of racism as critical race theorist Derrick Bell reminds us in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* and *Silent Covenants*. If we are to think about the psychological effects of racism and sexism, it might be useful to think about ways of loving the "margins" rather than articulating the ways the margin is marginalized or how it became marginalized. This, I read, is hooks' contention.
 10. Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye* (New York, NY: Plume, 1970), 204-5.
 11. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 205.
 12. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 205.
 13. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 206.
 14. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 198-99.
 15. Perhaps the most intriguing of these is her emphasis on utilizing the erotic in the classroom space. hooks argues in her chapter "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process" that in order to "understand the place of eros and eroticism in the classroom, we must move beyond thinking of those forces solely in terms of the sexual, though that dimension need not be denied." Citing author Sam Keen, hooks notes that "When we limit 'erotic' to its sexual meaning, we betray our alienation from the rest of nature. We confess that we are not motivated by anything like the mysterious force that moves birds to migrate or dandelions to spring..." (195). Citing Keen, hooks emphasizes the need to inform and educate the entire person towards "self-actualizing...an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know..." (195). In emphasizing the erotic as necessary for fecundity hooks deepens our understanding of love and complex social relations we may have with one another. Loving blackness, then, becomes a set of complex relations as well as a state of "self-actualization."
 16. The concept of belonging has metaphysical implications when used to think about language and personal identity. If we follow the phenomenological philosophical tradition of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and as it was picked up by Merleau-Ponty we can see that being is in language; we exist in language. How we think about ourselves and the world (and our place in it) is determined, to a large extent, in terms of how we express this world in language. This, for hooks, becomes a problem for oppressed subjects.
 17. bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 169-70.
 18. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 170.
 19. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 167.
 20. Kelly Oliver. "Stopping the Anthropological Machine: Agambem with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty." *PhaenEx 2* (Fall/winter, 2007):1-23.
 21. Here, there is some necessary departure from Merleau-Ponty in that the earth for him is an anonymous place wherein social facts like race and gender may not be real entities to engage. On this reading, it would be difficult to fathom how this could be a space for re-signifying blackness, given that there is no blackness. hooks, as I take her, is making a metaphysical claim about the American nation, and nations like America, needing to get "below" the history, the pathos of desire and dread, to a level of love and utter vulnerability wherein we can critically reevaluate ourselves, which does not need language—it is prelinguistic.
 22. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 171.
 23. Mos Def. *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus Records, 1999.
 24. Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*.
 25. Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*.
 26. Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*.
 27. Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*.
 28. It is for this reason that hooks complicates our understanding of margin and "center," de-tangling one from the other wherein nothing is centered and nothing is marginalized. In love, how can there be a center and a margin?
 29. This term, like earth (*la terre*), serves a double duty; it is signified and re-signified in the same moment, saying two things at once creating what Julia Kristeva calls ambiguity of language. In post-colonial theory, the subaltern is the place where marginalized voices speak, often a place of resistance, of reconnection of the colonized with itself against the hegemonic system. In this case, the subaltern takes on an additional meaning of a place where language itself is formulated and signified; to a pre-linguistic moment where values are shaped, a sort of metaphysical stance against the hegemony of language itself to signify and carve up the world. What we need then is not more words, but a different ontological space where words themselves can be re-signified and reconstituted. Similarly, what we need to fight white supremacy is not black supremacy. Rather, what we need is an alternate epistemology grounded on an alternate subaltern of signification. The subaltern of this space relocates our horizon of white hegemony to that of loving and valuing blackness, the marginalized space which no longer is marginal after whiteness no longer constitutes the center and blackness is released from its oppositional gaze (to be loved and valued for itself, in itself).

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