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Teaching to transgress

bell hooks

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| Brazil |

translated by Edmund Ruge

An Engaged Pedagogy, Hand-in-Hand with the Practice of Freedom[1]hooks, bell. Ensinando a transgredir – a educação como prática da liberdade. Martins Fontes. São Paulo, 2013 (hooks, bell. Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. Routledge. New York, 1994)

I

magine that a black female thinker, an intellectual and activist from the US with decades of experience in teaching at different institutions, rang your doorbell or paid a visit to your school, university, collective, restaurant… and began talking to you about the challenges

and potencies inherent to the act of teaching as a practice of freedom, about the links between critical pedagogy and engaged buddhism, feminist thought, eroticism, sexuality, and social class clashes in the classroom, and any other topic that might come up in such a conversation?

And if, beyond that, she spoke of tediousness in university classes, and of the need to cultivate the pleasure of teaching, with enthusiasm, as a pedagogical tool, among other themes, in a prose that navigates with fluency between informal and academic tones? That thinker is bell hooks, a prominent intellectual, thinker, and black feminist activist with more than 30 books published. The book that would allow for this imaginary conversation is *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, a collection of essays that takes on these themes and others, but in a fluid narrative that speaks to the contemporary Brazilian educational reality.

Written in 1994 and released in Brazil in 2013, the work precedes a growing tide of hooks translations now arriving in the Brazilian editorial market, including *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* in 2018; *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, both in 2019, just to mention a few other essay collections. In these works, the black US feminist thinker and activist reveals herself as a crystal-clear essayist and sharp analyst of cultural and artistic representations from a racial point of view.

Nevertheless, part of the importance of this work is in bringing hooks' little-known (at least in Brazil) face to the public. Here, the qualities highlighted in the preceding paragraph are interconnected with the writer and teacher, who revisits her past as a student in the south of the US, the crisis she confronted on being granted tenure at Oberlin's English department ("I was haunted by dreams of running away — of disappearing — yes, even of dying"[2]Teaching to Transgress, p. 1), given that she had dreamed of being a writer and not an educator, as she remarks in the introduction, until becoming a professor with more than 20 years of experience and one who sees in education a political mission, deeply connected to the act of writing about race, gender, social class, and decolonization in an accessible mode for different publics.

In the 14 essays that compose this collection, the author opens her “toolbox” to reveal strategies, difficulties, and influences in the process of becoming a professor inside and outside the classroom. The texts were written at different moments for different audiences, and, as such, numerous themes repeat themselves throughout the text. The book is directed just as much to educators as to students, given that bell hooks uses her point of view as a teacher just as much as she does her position as a student in different contexts and moments in her life. We may add, also, that the book is valuable for all those that see in education — formal and informal — a means of broadening our capacity to exercise freedom as historical subjects.

The geography of the book’s content and its introduction play a key role as the author revisits her formative years, from a childhood in the segregated US South to an adolescence in the context of desegregation. Between one context and another, there is a watershed. In segregated black schools, the majority of professors were black women. Teaching was anticolonial and antiracist, and education was directed towards the practice of freedom. With the end of segregation (in the mid-1960s) schools were commonly made up of white educators, the construction of knowledge was reduced to the transmission of information, and classes ended up reproducing racial stereotypes. Hooks then narrates her college years (also the moment in which she began to teach) and graduate school.

One of the most interesting points in her training as an educator takes place in this period, first because she notes that classes were boring — enthusiasm, the happiness of teaching, were not even considered. In a number of essays, hooks critiques the generalized academic notion that a good class should be concentrated in the speaking prowess of the teacher. “To enter classroom settings colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress.”[3] Ibid. p. 7 Another turning point in her trajectory began in graduate school, when the author first came into contact with the work of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, who, according to the author, provided her with a political language at a time when hooks felt called to become an insurgent black feminist thinker. “When I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, my first introduction to critical pedagogy, I found a mentor and a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberatory.”[4] Ibid. p. 8 It is in this period that one of Freire’s sayings became her

mantra: one does not enter the fight as an object in order to become a subject afterward.

In works such as *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Pedagogy in Progress: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, and *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (composed of conversations between Freire and Antonio Faundez), hooks mentions that she feels a deep empathy and identification with Freireian writers, given that she also comes from a rural background and experienced a deep connection with her black high school teachers through education as a practice of liberty. Beyond reading his work, hooks knew Freire personally, first meeting him at a seminar at the university where she taught.

At that moment, hooks critiqued him for the use of sexist language in his texts. Freire not only accepted her critiques, he also noted he would be more attentive in his subsequent work — and he was. For the author, it was at this moment that she came to love the Brazilian educator. He had demonstrated his own teachings in his behavior and a coherence between theory and practice. Aside from entering into various discussions throughout hooks' book, Freire is a central theme in chapter four, in which the author creates an imaginary interview, in which Gloria Watkins (the author's birth name), interviews bell hooks (the name she adopted to pay homage to her maternal great-grandmother), on the impact of Freire's work on her own production.

Ilustration: Juliana Barbosa

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One of the book's central aspects is the way in which the author builds her concept of an *Engaged Pedagogy*, the main theme of chapter one. This way of seeing education, fostered over time, is the result of the confluence of several sources: a critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, antiracism, feminism, and a holistic approach to learning, which emphasizes, in addition to the importance of cognition, the importance of spiritual aspects and the individual hopes of students. In the last case, alongside Freire, she cites the importance of another teacher, writing of the engaged Buddhism of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhât Hanh.

Chapters two and three take on multiculturalism. In the former, entitled *A Revolution of Values,* the main voice is that of Martin Luther King. The chapter discusses the fundamental requirements and challenges of multicultural classrooms, taking on the questions of being prepared to and disposed to embrace change (the focus of chapter three), building formative spaces for trading experience and fears, and questioning the banking system of education, among other themes. Hooks emphasizes numerous times throughout the book that it is not enough to change curriculum content, but it is also imperative to change habits and attitudes. In the case of multiculturalism, embracing change requires a "true revolution of values," she writes, citing King.

Chapters five and six center on the centrality of experience in the author's pedagogical formulation. Chapter five, entitled *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, hooks defends that theorization, based in pain and struggle, maintains a potential for healing and collective liberation, one in which theory and practice work together. Using personal examples and other studies, hooks argues that children can be great theorists, in that they are capable of questioning various aspects of adult life that we tend to normalize, such as sexism and racism.

Hooks goes on in this chapter to assert the importance of theories that can be shared orally

and in writing. On reflecting on her feminist thought, she affirms, "To me, this theory emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to intervene critically in my life and the lives of others."[5] Ibid. p. 70 With this, she seeks to make feminist theory accessible to different publics, allowing more people to adhere to feminism.

In chapter six, *Essentialism and Experience*, hooks defends the idea that sharing personal experiences in the classroom, in a non-essentialist way, is a way to create a school community of learning in which all involved are interested in classroom discussions, as they feel that the content discussed possesses bonds to and responds to matters in their personal lives. Hooks argues that the ability to flow from the personal and everyday to the academic allows a teacher to potentialize students' capacity to learn.

Chapters seven, eight, and nine focus on discussions of feminist solidarity among white and black US women, feminist thought, and black academics.

Chapter ten is worth highlighting. *Building a Teaching Community* is written in a form of dialogue between a white male educator and a black female educator, Ron Scapp and bell hooks, as a way of creating dialogues and policies of solidarity between intellectuals of different gender and race, daring to break with these borders in order to collaborate around common world visions. Based in the common conception of pedagogy as a practice of liberty, these two professors exchange ideas in respect to their trajectories and conceptions of education and teaching.

The overarching idea they defend is that, in order to construct a pedagogical teaching community, holding true to the principle of engaged pedagogy, it is necessary to transform the structure of the pedagogy of teaching, such as the curriculum. However, it is also necessary to go farther, and transform attitudes, as a class with progressive content may yet be delivered in a conservative and authoritarian manner. In other words, Ron Scapp and bell hooks defend that more than just content, the practice of teaching must also be emancipated.

Other themes addressed include the relationship between the teaching of English and decolonization in *Language* (chapter 11), social class in *Confronting Class in the Classroom* (chapter 12), and sexuality in *Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process* (chapter 13).

The final essay, *Ecstasy*, is an homage to the "art of teaching." The author highlights, however, the physical and emotional exhaustion that engaged pedagogy entails, owing, for example, to the greater popularity of these classes in relation to traditional banking system classes. This, paradoxically, she recognizes, impedes the transformation of the classroom into a community living experience in which all are able to express themselves, to listen, and to share responsibility for the class. Even so, bell hooks ends her book with the following words:

"The academy 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 co!lectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994 p. 207).

In times such as these in Brazil and in the rest of the world, with the rise of conservative political forces, and in which free, progressive, and engaged thinking itself, inside and outside of schools, is under attack, bell hooks invites us to think of the field of education, in a broad sense, as the exercise of freedom. The book is as current as ever.