

bell hooks, 1952-2021

writer, activist, teacher: an appreciation

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bell hooks, you taught me to bring myself into my teaching, always

Two black women sit and talk about bell hooks and her impact on them as teachers and individuals.

Azumah: Some years ago, while co-teaching with a colleague, we were encouraging our MEd students to rethink education by reading the work of inspirational educators. Along with a number of other names, I wrote bell hooks on a PowerPoint slide. My helpful colleague discretely noticed a typo and corrected it on my behalf. What was written as bell hooks became Bell Hooks. I thanked him for making the change and corrected it. Not everyone knew this writer, critic and activist who had had such a powerful impact on my life. Having assumed as pseudonym the name of her maternal grandmother, a sharp-tongued woman who spoke her mind, bell hooks refused capitalisation in a self-deprecating move designed to draw attention to her work rather than her person.

Mel: For me, I came to hooks in 2017, whilst struggling with internal demons. A friend recommended bell hooks, *All About Love*, and reading it changed not only how I saw my relationship with others but also my relationship with myself. This was the beginning of a love story. A love story in respect to hooks herself, but also a pedagogic love story. For bell insists that everything we do should come from a place of love.

Azumah: Born in 1952 into apartheid, in Hopkinsville, Kentucky - southern states of America, bell was a prolific writer. I still find it shocking that when she was born, the USA, the land of the free, practiced what is euphemistically called segregation. It was a white supremacist state which legislated apartheid. This is recent history. Most of us will have living family members who were born at or around the same time. When bell makes reference to freedom (*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*), one might imagine that she was yearning for freedom from segregation and its afterlives. But with the ending of

its official policy of apartheid, black children in the southern states were bussed to previously white schools to be taught by teachers for whom knowledge might be equated with information, where a black girl with a voracious appetite for reading had to instead learn obedience lest she become a threat to white authority. The messianic zeal with which black teachers in segregated schools sought to transform the minds of their charges was gone. As was the idea of school as a place of ecstasy, pure pleasure and danger.

She started her first book of cultural criticism at the age of 19. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* was eventually published in 1981 while she was teaching English and studying for her doctorate at University of California at Santa Cruz. The title quotes Sojourner Truth (a woman born into slavery, abolitionist, and activist). The book stands as a challenge to assumptions about black women at the intersections of race, gender and class. She critiqued feminism for failing to recognise the prevalence of racism (all the women are white) and rejected black liberation for failing to recognise sexism (all blacks are men). By the time of her passing in December 2021, at the age of 69, bell had written 40 books.

Mel: When I arrived in post-16 education, fresh-faced and enthusiastic, after a decade of primary school teaching, I quickly began to feel that exuberance and joy I felt for imparting knowledge to others was misplaced and inappropriate. Smiling jolly excitement felt necessary when teaching 6-year-old children - how else to capture the interest of bright-eyed, susceptible young minds? Yet, for adults, my smile and excitement served to highlight my inexperience and reveal my unbelonging. I was, in my style of delivery, the antithesis of an adult educator. Tone it down, I told myself. Smile less. Laugh less. Be less. Excitement in Higher Education is an unwelcome disruption to the scholarly atmosphere that seemed to define the learning process.

Azumah: I first encountered bell as a postgraduate. An activist and femiist, I was part of a Black Women's Group. We called ourselves - Talawah (a Jamaican

word for small but strong, brave). Having completed schooling and university without knowingly encountering a black writer, bell made me aware of a deep hunger, a yearning, that I had been oblivious to before reading her. This is a moment when being changed by ideas was pleasure in its purest form. For the decade that followed I read nothing but black women writers. Somehow bell said to me (without ever uttering the words) that this black female body was well placed in the academy. Her humanist and spiritual ideals with an interest in self-renewal, community, love, forgiveness and care did not chime completely with me. We need more than love. I am insistently inclined towards cynicism. But there are moments when through the soft-focus of her almost therapeutic approach to pedagogy - like a blade, or shard of paper - she pierces the skin. One of those moments is in her seminal text - *Teaching to Transgress*.

Mel: For bell hooks, entering classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. *Teaching to Transgress* changed how I view the act of teaching. Teaching to transgress means teaching that goes beyond the limits of what is prescribed. It is to practice epistemic disobedience; to refuse to accept systems and structures of education as they are. Transgressive teaching cultivates the ethical imagination. It's a call to revolution. It is to hear the subaltern speak and to quote their words; to amplify them. The engaged pedagogy hooks presents in *Teaching to Transgress* is a liberatory practice, a way of teaching where everyone can learn not through power and control but through community and empowerment for both educator and student.

Azumah: Published in 1994 while she was a Distinguished Professor of English at City College New York, *Teaching to Transgress* is a series of fourteen essays. To think with bell is to think against and beyond her. It is relief that she disavows any attempt to provide a pedagogic blueprint. A life laid bare, in the classroom, is not a stance everyone would seriously contemplate let alone practice. For a feminist scholar to offer utter acolyte-like devotion to Freire is troubling. But some ideas, once they take shape, remain. The idea that intrigues me the most is that of theory being akin in her life to a superhero. For bell, theory is not some rarefied, abstract entity located in library books propounded by important canonical grey-haired old men. Theory helped her understand her pain and her hurt. It made it possible for her to understand what was happening, in, to and around her. In theory bell was able to imagine possible futures, to live and love differently. There is no 'gap' between theory and practice. Theory and practice are intimates. I love this idea and find all sorts of echoes. Pain and hurt and

love define hooks's emotional landscape. But rage and frustration are more familiar companions for anyone who works in an FE college, enduring the incoherence and absurdities of government policy; the stress of 50 - 60 hours work per week, every week including holidays; the anxiety of not knowing whether a class will recruit and therefore being unable to rely on an annual salary; the anger at seeing students come to college hungry and cold; the irritation with a manager whose job is to hit targets rather than enable teaching. Is anything other than that ethical outrage possible? I find it hard to align with hooks and her pedagogic peace and love stance. But nonetheless, her words resonate. 'We need new theories, rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality'.

Mel: It was and remains a joy to read *Teaching to Transgress*. She advises that 'teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualisation that promotes their well-being'. According to hooks, educators need to be vulnerable and human. Anything other than this personal engagement risks upholding 'the dualistic separation of public and private'. This is a split that encourages teachers and students to see no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of [adult educators]. 'Dividing the personal and the professional objectifies teaching and the teacher, reducing our worth to a function of the system: the extent to which 'we are able to do our jobs'. This Black female scholar emphatically reminds us that who we are is more. She invites us to value our soul and the soul of teaching.

With engaged pedagogy we are vulnerable and present with our students. We bring ourselves to our teaching and make plain our passions, beliefs and dispositions.

Key Texts:

- hooks, b. (1981) *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*
- (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*
- (1991) 'Theory as liberatory practice' in *Teaching to Transgress* (below) pp59-75
- (1992) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*
- (2000) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*
- (2000) *Where We Stand: Class Matters*
- (2003) *Teaching Community: a Pedagogy of Hope*
- (2004) *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*
- (2014) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.