

On the Ethics of Education: bell hooks' Conception of Education as the Practice of Freedom

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One unfortunate development of recent times is the contagion of an uncompromising “utilitarian” approach to education. Indeed, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to speak in terms of the end of education. But the notion of the end in this context is not meant to signal the literal termination of education or the more positive view that education has exhausted its telos. Rather, the notion of end here signals the dethroning of the idea of education as judged by its internal goods. Instead, education is evaluated only in terms of its external goods. Consequently, the dogmatic proclamation now dominates that the purpose of education today is to prepare workers to be competitive in the global economy; in short, the purpose of education is to train individuals to acquire marketable skills which will enable them to obtain high paying jobs. What we have then is the operation of a certain performativity that is evident in the practice of evaluating the educational system in terms of the optimization of the relationship between input and output. This utilitarian orthodoxy also takes the form of the uncritical promotion of the natural sciences and business studies while under funding the humanities and social sciences.

With regard to higher education in the English speaking Caribbean, two authors recently registered complaints against the continuous marginalizing the humanities and social sciences. Don Marshall in his essay “Academic Travails and a Crisis-of-Mission of the University of the West Indies’ Social Sciences: From History and Critique to Anti-Politics,” laments the scarcity of “critical academic research emanating from the social Sciences of the UWI.”¹ In another context, Sir Courtney Blackman laments the absence of a faculty of philosophy at the University of the West Indies. He expresses his desire to “see a faculty of philosophy added to the university curriculum,” adding that, “it is through philosophy that we gain new knowledge.”²

Returning to the reigning utilitarian orthodoxy regarding education, it should be noted that it obscures another conception of education, one rooted in the notion of education as preparing individuals to acquire certain attitudes and traits that are conducive to human flourishing. This conception of education has traditionally been tied to the importance of education to democracy, understood as a way of life. According to Dewey:

A democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that

¹ Don Marshall, “Academic Travails and a Crisis-of-Mission of the University of the West Indies’ Social Sciences: From History and Critique to Anti-Politics,” in *Higher Education in the Caribbean: Past, Present and Future Directions* edited by Glenford Howe (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2000), p. 59.

² Courtney Blackman, *The Practice of Economic Management: A Caribbean Perspective* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006), p. 399.

each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and [gender] which kept [human beings] from perceiving the full import of their activity.”³

Despite Dewey’s keen insights regarding the connection between democracy and human existence, the current political environment fosters an attitude of disdain for the humanities, arts, and social sciences. This dismissive attitude actively encourages the attitude that the relevance of education for the idea of democracy as a way of life is merely an esoteric indulgence not worthy of serious consideration.

In this brief essay, I shall seek to expand on the idea of education as promoting democracy by focusing on bell hooks’ idea of education as the practice of freedom. Indeed, hooks would not only recommend placing a focus on singularity, alterity and justice at the core of liberal education but would also agree that, “If ... the experience of education is the experience of the singularity of the other, of the other as a singular being, then we can say that education has its proper place in [the project of deconstruction as ethics].”⁴ Finally, hooks’ conception of education as the practice of freedom is also intimately related to her commitment to feminism and to her deployment of feminist critiques of patriarchy.

I will make my case for hooks’ position by employing the following strategy: I will first present a brief review of Plato’s conception of education; I will then deploy Levinas to establish why the Platonic conception of philosophy is authoritarian in that it facilitates regimes of marginalization and exclusion. Lastly, I discuss bell hooks’ conception of education as the practice of freedom in order to counter the hegemony of the utilitarian conception of education. Of course, I will not be promoting a naïve or romantic conception of education. My argument is not intended to downplay the importance of education in guaranteeing the material success of society. However, the role of education for the purpose of material gains should not be promoted at the expense of suppressing its role in advancing the ethical and political condition of society.

Plato on Education

Consistent with Plato’s overall strategy, he does not present a treatise on education; rather, he creatively utilizes dialogues, and various rhetorical and literary tropes to communicate his position on this issue. Indeed, Plato’s view on education is not presented in a series of deductive arguments but, rather, through the medium of very powerful analogies. He used the metaphors of the Cave, the Sun, and the Divided Line to develop his conception of education. Here, I will be concentrating on his cave imagery, since Plato intends the cave image to serve as an analogy for the human condition—

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York; The Free Press, 1966), p. 87.

⁴ Gert Biesta, “Preparing for the Incalculable’: Deconstruction, Justice, and the Question of Education,” in *Derrida & Education*, Gert Biesta and Denise Egéa-Kuehne (eds) (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 50.

“concerning education or lack of it” [514A1-2]⁵ Let us briefly examine the allegory of the cave for the purpose of grasping its implications for Plato’s theory of education.

In the allegory of the cave the prisoners’ movement from the cave to daylight models the movement of the soul to the intelligible realm, and Plato informs us that education facilitates this movement or epistemic journey of the soul. He claims that the job of the educator is to energize the spirited part of the student’s soul. Accordingly, Plato emphasizes the cognitive effects of education in facilitating the movement of the soul to the intelligible realm of the Forms. This focusing on the intelligible realm, Plato maintains, is best sustained through mathematical education. An education in mathematics will liberate the student from the realm of what is perceptible and allows him to focus his soul on the intelligible realm.

True education leads the students away from perceptible things, from things as they appear, to things as they are in themselves; education emphasizes reasoning rather than perception. Hence, the goal or purpose of a Platonic education is to liberate the soul from the seduction of those things that tie it to the perceptible realm. Plato’s goal is to redirect the soul toward the truth and toward knowledge of the Forms. A liberating education, then, is an education at the service of the elevation of the soul toward an ultimate reality.

Plato’s conception of education is dependent upon a two-tiered metaphysics: first, Plato posits that the spatio-temporal world, the world of everyday existence, is the temporal world of change and decay. This ordinary, everyday world is corrupt and deceitful. It is impossible to gain knowledge in this spatio-temporal world precisely because it is constantly in a state of change and flux. Consequently, it cannot serve as the grounding for knowledge of ultimate, unchanging truth.

After denigrating the spatio-temporal world, Plato posits the nonspatial, atemporal realm, the world of the Forms. This realm is not populated by material objects or the common objects of experience. Unlike the inferior things in the physical world that are subject to change and decay, the Forms are eternal, nonmaterial, unchanging and perfect. Since the Forms are metaphysically different from material objects, Plato tells us that we cannot know them through the senses but only through Reason, which he characterizes as a unique power of the soul. On this Platonic view of things, true knowledge is not to be found in the spatio-temporal realm but is obtained or, rather, made possible through alienation from the world of physical existence and experience. This alienation from the physical world is achieved through reason, the faculty which, in connecting us to the Forms, enables us to acquire real knowledge. We recall that this is indeed the goal of education.

One consequence of Plato’s position is that knowledge related to the empirical study of the physical world is devalued. Since empirical modes of inquiry focus on a metaphysically undeveloped and inferior world, the products of empirical inquiry are

⁵ References to the text of the *Republic* are taken from *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

epistemologically inferior to those of philosophical reflection grounded in the exercise of Reason.

However, Plato's conception of education as knowledge of the Forms entails disastrous consequences, for in so restricting education, Plato denigrates the perceptible realm. But, education that leads students away from the world of everyday human existence is not education at the service of freedom, precisely because such an education distorts or ignores the fact that human institutions, although not perfect, are always subject to improvement. Focusing beyond human institutions and gazing toward a removed metaphysical realm is synonymous with abandoning the human realm and, accordingly, it constitutes a betrayal of our ethical responsibilities. But more needs to be done in order to establish the plausibility of this claim.

Plato's denigration of the physical world and empirical knowledge, on the one hand, and his valuing of the realm of the Forms as true reality, on the other hand, has also been identified as encouraging an imperialistic conception of philosophy. We find, in Plato, the basic strategy of establishing a regime of sameness and identity which sustains intelligibility. Then on the basis of this regime, he suppresses what cannot be integrated into Sameness and identity. The marginalization of the everyday world of human activities is a logical consequence of his position.

Let us briefly examine Levinas' critique of philosophical imperialism and the practice of marginalizing that which cannot be integrated into a dominant regime of absolute concepts and principles.

Levinas against Totality

Levinas considers Western philosophies to be totalizing philosophies that exclude the other in the name of some present sameness. He also reads the history of Western philosophy as an extended ontology, a project of comprehending the being of what is or of "beings". Ultimately, this project of enclosing things within a dominant conceptual net assumes the task of translating the other into the same, of devouring or liquidating the other in order to transcribe all cases of otherness into sameness. This task, Levinas maintains, promotes an imperialism of sameness, with the tragic result that Western philosophy "has been struck with a horror of the Other that remains Other—with an insurmountable allergy."⁶ Rodolphe Gasché offers a crisp description of this phenomenon when he stated that: "Western philosophy is in essence the attempt to domesticate Otherness, since what we understand by thought is nothing but such a project..."⁷ The project in question is the reduction of plurality to unity, the reduction of alterity to sameness, and the mastery of the other. While denouncing the imperialist ontological tendencies of traditional philosophy, Levinas declares that "ethics is first philosophy." Ethics is first philosophy, according to him, because he advocates that the starting point of philosophical

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, edited by Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 346.

⁷ Rodolphe Gasché, *Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 101.

reflection should be the encounter with the “absolutely-other,” rather than the traditional project of pursuing a metaphysical determination of being. In announcing ethics, rather than ontology, as first philosophy, rather than ontology, Levinas intends to situate ethics as a radical questioning of the priority of the ego, of the knowing subject, and of self-consciousness. Levinas alternatively calls these things the ‘same’. And he defines the ‘same’ in the following way:

We call it ‘the same’ because in representation the ‘I’ precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the ‘I’ despite the multiplicity of objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the ‘I.’ To remain the same is to represent to oneself.⁸

If ontological pursuits foster the recoiling of the self into the self, while also facilitating a forgetting, even a suppression, of the other, Levinas directly connect ethics to the other when he states: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.”⁹ In another context, Levinas states “For me, the term ethics always signifies the fact of the encounter, of the relation of myself with the Other....”¹⁰ Simon Critchley insightfully captures the theoretical thrust of Levinas’s novel conception of ethics. Critchley writes that, “[E]thics is first and foremost a respect for the concrete particularity of the other person in his or her singularity.... Ethics begins as a relation with a singular, other person who calls me into question and then and only then calls me to the universal discourse of reason and justice. Politics begins with ethics.”¹¹ The idea that politics begins with ethics can also be consistently rendered as the claim that politics begins with a face-to-face encounter with a concrete other for whom one is called to be responsible. As Enrique Dussell maintains:

Philosophy begins with [human] reality, and human reality is practical, always already a priori person-to-person relationships in a communication community (of language and life), presupposed in reality (objectively) and transcendently (subjectively). Therefore, prior to nature, the other is always already encountered, vitally and pragmatically.¹²

Let us see how this intersection of ethics and politics bears on the relation between freedom and education.

bell hooks on education

Recently, bell hooks has championed the idea of education as the practice of freedom. hooks does not artificially limit her conception of freedom to the liberal idea of negative

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994), p. 126.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quoted in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, p. 5.

¹¹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 48.

¹² Enrique Dussell, *The Underside of Modernity; Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, translated by Eduardo Mendieta (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), p. 7.

freedom, where freedom is simply a lack of restraint on individuals. Rather, hooks embraces an ethical conception of freedom, a conception that is rooted in respect and responsibility for the other. Nevertheless, hooks is not championing a naïve understanding of freedom which would be rhetorically inspired but politically inept. Instead of advocating such an unfortunate conception of freedom, hooks seeks to move beyond the theoretical stasis that inflicts thinking about education and freedom; her strategy is consistent with Amartya Sen's idea of development as freedom. Sen maintains that "Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their...agency. The removal of substantial unfreedoms, ...is constitutive of development."¹³ He also adds, that, "Development...is the process of expanding human freedoms."¹⁴ Sen surely could have translated his point into hooks' language and write: "development is the practice of freedom."

hooks links education to freedom precisely because she supports an education that prepares individuals to resist and fight against all forms of domination and structures of oppression premised on enforcing some ultimate principle or metanarrative. For hooks, there are no ahistorical foundations and legitimations. There are no "essences beyond the context of a particular language game,"¹⁵ namely, that of economics, of religion, of science, etc. hooks demands that education be able to promote styles of thinking that eschew the violence of unifying structures. Furthermore, a crucial component of her conception of education as the practice of freedom is that the heterogeneity of language games undermines the idea of a stable human subject. hooks declares essentialism to be the enemy of those historically subordinated groups who were forced to sacrifice their subjectivity on the altar of some monolithic conception of identity. But, before we examine hooks' ideas further, it would be helpful to explain the significance of linking hooks with Levinas.

The Ethical Connection: hooks and Levinas

Joining hooks and Levinas in a relation of philosophical complementarity may appear bizarre. However, the shock or trauma of the encounter between two aliens others quickly dissipates when we come to appreciate that hooks' conception of education, when ethically situated, harmonizes with Levinas's idea of ethics as responsibility for the other. Indeed, as Gert Biesta states, "In so far as education is more than just a technical enterprise, in so far as the meaning of education exceeds enculturation, socialization, and domestication, it is precisely concerned with otherness."¹⁶ Thus, hooks' conception of freedom is consistent with Levinas' conception of responsibility for the other as defining one's ethical obligations; freedom is responsibility for the other. Responsibility for the

¹³ Amartya Sen, *Development As Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

¹⁶ Gert Biesta, "'Preparing for the Incalculable': Deconstruction, Justice, and the Question of Education," p. 34.

other is freedom to the extent that one's freedom is not primary, not a spontaneous given, not an unchallenged right, but must account for itself in the encounter with the other. In other words, freedom is not identical or reducible to autonomy.

We recall that the Kantian conception of freedom holds that an individual is free to the extent that he obeys the internal voice of reason and, accordingly, imposes his own rational will on himself. Indeed, Kant confidently proclaims that one is free only if one obeys the moral law of reason. The free individual does not submit to the law of another but only heeds the internal moral law. For Levinas, on the other hand, morality does not begin with freedom; rather morality emerges when one's freedom is challenged by the other. The result of this encounter is that morality is not grounded in autonomy; it is grounded in heteronomy, in the presence of the other.

Since it is my contention that hooks' position is consistent with the idea that freedom emerges from the face to face encounter with the other, it bears noting that if one is to let the other be without any attempt to control the other by means of epistemic containment, then this letting be of the other entails resisting the structures of domination that undermine the infinity of the other. Furthermore, it seems that hooks' view reinforces the idea that freedom should not be alienated from responsibility precisely because we enter the world not as totally independent beings but, rather, are born into a network of social relationships which we have not chosen and yet which we cannot ignore. Freedom then is a matter of embracing the responsibilities that the world of social relationships confers upon us. We are awakened to our freedom in response to the demands of human existence but, most importantly, our relations with others. If freedom as autonomy presupposes the solitary person, our being alone, freedom as responsibility tells us that we are never alone but, rather, are forever face to face with other people, who always summons us to acknowledge our responsibility to the other. Assuming then that freedom and ethics are compatible on the grounds that one's freedom comes to life in the embracing of responsibility for the other, we need to examine the role of education in reinforcing this marriage of freedom and ethics.

In linking hooks to Levinas and, in particular, to his idea of ethics as first philosophy and his association of ethics with the other, we should also note the complementarity of hooks and Derrida, specifically with regard to the idea of the other. The common thread connecting hooks with Derrida is the ethico-political thrust of deconstruction. Indeed, Derrida maintains that rather than being "an enclosure in nothingness," deconstruction is "an openness towards the other."¹⁷ This idea of deconstruction as an openness to the other captures both the sense of an openness to the other, of a face-to-face encounter, as well as the idea of the other in the sense of that which is unforeseeable from the present, of that which is not a structured possibility as dictated by the logic of the same. But it is precisely at this point that deconstruction becomes intimately related to hooks' idea of education as the practice of freedom. Education as the practice of freedom, as will be discussed shortly, is against totalization so, to this extent, such an education can

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," translated by C. Porter, in W. Godzich and L. Waters (eds) *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 124.

accommodate the other precisely because the other as that which is to come, the other ‘as event, exceeds calculation, rules, program, anticipations and so forth.’¹⁸

Before launching into the details of hooks’ position, it bears mentioning that her characterization of education as a practice is compatible with two senses of practice. Here I will draw a distinction between the normative and the existential sense of practice. First, we can understand practice in the sense of a coherent and intelligible activity constituted on the basis of certain regulative rules and defined in terms of the pursuit of certain substantive goods. MacIntyre provides perhaps the best description of this conception of a practice. He writes:

By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.¹⁹

Clearly, education is a practice in MacIntyre’s sense precisely because, among other things, education is defined in terms of its internal goods, namely excellence in educating students well so that they acquire certain traits, attitudes, dispositions, etc.

On the other hand, there is also the sense of practice understood as praxis. I consider this second sense as the existential sense of practice. This second understanding of practice suggests activity, namely activity in the sense of being politically engaged or involved. This second construal of practice is also consistent with the Marxist notion of praxis as human activity. More specifically, this is the kind of activity that is a reflection of human potentialities or human species-being. As Richard Bernstein concludes, “the very nature or character of a man is determined by what he does or his praxis.”²⁰ Praxis, hence, defines the self.

Both the normative and the existential senses of practice are compatible with hooks’ conception of education as the practice of freedom. Education is the practice of freedom when education is defined as engaged in the teaching excellence, and education is the

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, translated by P. A. Brault and M. B. Nass (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 27.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187.

²⁰ Richard Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 44.

practice of freedom when education emphasizes transformation and reconstruction of both self and society. With these preliminaries attended to, we can now turn to a detailed discussion of hooks.

Educating for Subjectivity

hooks obviously supports a particular dynamics with regard to education. According to hooks, Paulo Freire

was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about the construction of an identity in resistance. There was this one sentence of Freire's that became a revolutionary mantra for me: 'We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects'.²¹

The idea that one should not enter political struggle as an object, with the intention of becoming a subject at a later date, enables hooks to establish a connection between an individual's desire to learn and the desire for self-transformation. Learning, according to hooks, is liberatory. She firmly embraces "the vision of liberating education that connects the will to know with the will to become."²² In another context, hooks expands on the importance of why being a subject advances human freedom. She writes that

As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subjects."²³

The connection in hooks' thinking between subjectivity and education is also evident in her account of the relevance of postmodern thinking to black subjectivity. As consistent with her notion of education as the practice of freedom, she gladly encourages critical education that can assist in the decolonization of the mind. The decolonization of consciousness, among other things, can take place through a repudiation of essentialist conceptions of identity. hooks writes:

The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenges notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and

²¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 46.

²² *Ibid.*, pp 18-19.

²³ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, South End Press, 1989), pp. 42-43.

mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.²⁴

Education and Epistemological Pluralism

Education, for hooks, is not the grasping of truths about abstract entities; rather education as the practice of freedom is both experientially sensitive as well as enabling, a practice that “enhance[s] our capacity to be free.”²⁵

Education as the practice of freedom, according to hooks, counteracts attempts to institute cognitive hegemony by being firmly committed to cognitive heteronomy and multiplicity. As such, hooks sees education as sustaining cognitive pluralism and an appreciation of the importance of approaching the universe as incomplete and ripe with possibilities. hooks states that education as the practice of freedom is not a matter of “replac[ing] one dictatorship of knowing with another, changing one set way of thinking for another.”²⁶ hooks’ embrace of pluralism reveals her repudiation of various strategies of totalization that seek to encircle reality in a net of categories. Here, hooks’ views are consistent with the deconstructionist’s agenda to underscore the “impossibility to totalize, the impossibility to articulate a self-sufficient, self-present center from which everything can be mastered and controlled.”²⁷ It warrants mentioning that hooks’ embrace of an epistemological pluralism, in this context, is a further manifestation of her rejection of essentialism. Commenting on identity, hooks writes, “We are avant-garde only to the extent that we eschew essentialist notions of identity, and fashion selves that emerge from the meeting of diverse epistemologies, habits of being, concrete class locations, and radical political commitments.”²⁸ Clearly, education as the practice of freedom is no ally of essentialism or of totalizing epistemological schemes.

Education as Liberation and Education Domination

hooks further contextualizes her notion of education as the practice of freedom by drawing a distinction between two conceptions of education: “education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination.”²⁹ Unlike the more dynamic education, that is, education as the practice of freedom, hooks denounces education that encourages passivity and that does not facilitate the ethical transformation of people from objects to subjects. Accordingly, hooks, following one of her intellectual mentors, Paulo Freire, denounces what she calls the banking system of education. She

²⁴ bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Yearning; race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), p. 28.

²⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ Gert Biesta, “‘Preparing for the Incalculable’: Deconstruction, Justice, and the Question of Education,” pp. 46-47.

²⁸ bell hooks, “The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity,” in *Yearning; race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), p. 19.

²⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, p. 4.

tells us that, “The banking system of education [is] based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date...”³⁰ As previously stated, hooks finds does not support this conception of education and its reduction of students into automatons. Rather, she advocates education in the vocation of freedom, meaning education that is committed to, among other things, the transformation of consciousness and the creation of a society whose structure is consistent with the idea of unity of differences, rather than hierarchies. hooks quotes Richard Shaull to further consolidate her vision of education as the practice of freedom. Shaull writes:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.³¹

While underscoring the transformative thrust of liberatory education, hooks maintains that there is no such thing as a neutral education, that is, an education dedicated only to the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake and devoid of any practical motivations. The idea of an education that is exempted or immune to human interests is politically blind. hooks endorses the following view:

If we accept education in this richer and more dynamic sense of acquiring a critical capacity and intervention in reality, we immediately know that there is no such thing as neutral education. All education has an intention, a goal, which can only be political. Either it mystifies reality by rendering it impenetrable and obscure-which leads people to a blind march through incomprehensible labyrinths or it unmask the economic and social structures which are determining the relationships of exploitation and oppression among persons, knocking down labyrinths and allowing people to walk their own road. So we find ourselves confronted with a clear option: to educate for liberation or educate for domination.³²

hooks also points out that her championing of the idea of education as the practice of freedom is not a naïve romantic view of education or the ill-conceived notion that somehow one can change institutional structures merely by reading texts. Liberatory education, not being a methodological textualism, is not reducible to competence in the techniques of literary analysis. Instead of divorcing education from the less than orderly affairs of everyday life and limiting the practice of education to passive engagement with abstract objects and principles, hooks tells us that education as the practice of freedom is rooted in the complexities and antagonisms of human existence. To enforce her idea of education as intervention in human struggle, she cites Peter McLaren’s account of the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

³¹ Quoted in bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, p. 64

³² Quoted in bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, p. 101

tendency to neutralize the progressive vision of diversity and, hence, to reinforce complacent thinking and political inertia. McLaren writes:

Diversity that somehow constitutes itself as a harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres is a conservative and liberal model of multiculturalism that, in my mind, deserves to be jettisoned because, when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.³³

Clearly, the idea of all knowledge as forged in histories that are played out in the area of social antagonisms is alien to the Platonic conception of knowledge as the grasping of truths about abstract objects. hooks shares McLaren's view precisely because she thinks that education should be about freedom, a tool to deconstruct those systems of domination that all too often tarnish social life. But to the extent that education serves the cause of freedom, this imperative entails that the institution of the university should accommodate liberatory education rather than education in the service of maintaining systems of domination. According to hooks:

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom. The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution....³⁴

I alluded earlier to the transformative power of education. It is important to clarify, however, that hooks does not limit the idea of the transformative capabilities of education to personal change. She is convinced that education can effectively unsettle the collective pathologies resulting from practices that maintain domination. Education, she maintains, must be the practice of freedom precisely because "a culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial."³⁵ Education is the antidote to collective lying and denial precisely because it gives us the courage to face reality. Again, the cure for collective lying and denial is not to retreat to some imaginary realm that is immune to the influence of the everyday world. The cure for this pathology is education that enables us to face up to creatively work through our shortcomings and that, ultimately, enables us to work through our guilt. From another perspective,

³³ Quoted in bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, p. 31.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 29-30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

education as the practice of freedom demands that we assume responsibility for our history, as well as for the world we have created. hooks writes:

When...collective cultural consumption of and attachment to misinformation is coupled with the layers of lying individuals do in their personal lives, our capacity to face reality is severely diminished as is our will to intervene and change unjust circumstances.³⁶

That there is an uncompromising political thrust to hooks' conception of education is undeniable. The immediate implication of the political relevance of education is its ability to serve as a tool to confront those powerful groups that valorize uncritical acceptance of the status quo, and who believe that the status quo is the manifestation of natural processes. These groups believe that things are as they are precisely because they should be. Again, education can undermine this belief in the inevitability of the status quo. hooks confidently proclaims that education can be used to counter those who

are most committed to maintaining systems of domination—racism, sexism, class exploitation, and imperialism. They promote a perverse vision of freedom that makes it synonymous with materialism, and they believe that domination is 'natural,' that it is right for the strong to rule the weak, the powerful over the powerless.³⁷

hooks is hostile to this way of thinking. She believes that liberatory education should not be complicit with the competitive ethics of materialism. According to her:

hedonistic materialism [is] a central aspect of an imperialist colonialism that perpetuates and maintains white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Since this is the ideological framework that breeds domination and a culture of repression, a repudiation of the ethics of materialism is central to any transformation of society.³⁸

So, hooks' repudiation of this competitive ethics is the reason why she favors an education that sanctions an ethics grounded on a relation to the other "that...is not reciprocal. It is not about exchange or barter which condemns the other to provide restitution for the good I do him. Such reciprocity is the hallmark of the economic relationship, in which circulation is dominated by the rule of reciprocal utility; it does not capture the uniqueness of the ethical relationship."³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

³⁸ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 170.

³⁹ Quoted in *Derrida & Education*, Gert Biesta and Denise Egéa-Kuehne (eds) (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 167.

Engaged Pedagogy

In discussing hooks' conception of education, it is helpful to briefly examine her views on pedagogy. First, hooks underscores the fact that the primary focus of pedagogy is the student, and she maintains that teaching should be grounded in an ethics of respect for students. She writes:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.⁴⁰

hooks describes her conception of pedagogy as “engaged pedagogy.” She champions an approach to teaching that stresses the importance of promoting the good of students for the purpose of empowering them to assume the role of subjects rather than objects in education. Again, the courage to resist structures of domination seems to entail having already obtained the requisite attitudes, dispositions, and inclinations that facilitate critical intervening in the world. According to hooks:

Progressive, holistic education, ‘engaged pedagogy’ is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.⁴¹

hooks expands the scope of her approach to pedagogy by clearly revealing its political and ethical implications. She connects her approach to pedagogy with political struggles against domination. This move is intimately connected with the ethical imperative of assuming responsibility for the other. To be responsible for the other requires that we not allow the subjectivity and singularity of the other to be captivated by political arrangements that treat individuals as objects rather than subjects. hooks states:

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies. This complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives has been an engaging and powerful standpoint from which to work.⁴²

⁴⁰ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Finally, hooks does not limit her notion of engaged pedagogy to political struggle. She also believes that education should be about the transformation of students. Students should be encouraged to experiment and to avoid being contained within limiting cultural, political, historical, and social belief systems. Here, education takes on an ethical tone, in that students should be encouraged to welcome other conceptions of self. Instead of embracing the dogmatism of hegemonic forms of existence, hooks thinks that students should be prepared to transgress conventional boundaries. Hence hooks “celebrate[s] teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries.”⁴³ And she adds that, “It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.”⁴⁴

hooks’ take on education is not meant to sound apocalyptic; she has no desire to join in the latest orgy of complaints denouncing the sad state of education. hooks is more concerned with delivering a constructive message about education. Indeed, it is not that education is a failure but, rather, that we have failed education as the practice of freedom. hooks inspires us 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 collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.⁴⁵

Conclusion

One possible critical response to hooks’ position is to argue that Plato’s conception of education is preferable to hooks’ precisely because Plato was aware of the fact that particularity, history, culture, and tradition are incubators of irrationality. Hence, one way to free individuals from the narrow-mindedness of tribalism and the selfishness of excessive individualism is to encourage them to transcend all particularities by embracing universality and the objectivity of truth and knowledge. Accordingly, hooks’ endorsement of education as the practice of freedom seemingly undermines the universality of truth and knowledge and sanctions a cheap relativism that is corrosive of objectivity and rationality. Indeed, according to this criticism, her praise of education as the practice of freedom is nothing more than a glorification of a divisive identity politics.

This critique of hooks is off target, however, because it is not her intention to endorse cheap relativism or to undermine the normativity of truth and knowledge. Rather, unlike Plato, hooks underscores the impossibility and undesirability of

⁴³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 207.

metaphysical closure. She is also not seduced by the false hope of redemption through metaphysical comfort. Her intent is to affirm our existential responsibility, namely, that we must affirmatively confront the fact that the basis of sociality is the intersubjective constitution of the socio-cultural world and its constellation of institutions, mediating structures, practices and rituals. To embrace the intersubjectivity manifested in the material order of things entails an ethical responsibility to the other, a responsibility echoed in the need to dismantle the structures of domination that rob individuals of their creative human agency. This is the task that is to be served by education.