

February 2023

## Resisting Burnout: bell hooks' Pedagogy of Hope and Teaching Antiracist Feminism Online at the University of Wyoming During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Samantha L. Vandermeade  
*University of Wyoming*, svanderm@uwyo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vandermeade, Samantha L. (2023) "Resisting Burnout: bell hooks' Pedagogy of Hope and Teaching Antiracist Feminism Online at the University of Wyoming During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Feminist Pedagogy*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss1/4>

This Critical Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@calpoly.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@calpoly.edu).

---

## Resisting Burnout: bell hooks' Pedagogy of Hope and Teaching Antiracist Feminism Online at the University of Wyoming During the Covid-19 Pandemic

### Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Dr. Mary Margaret Fonow for reviewing early versions of this draft and helping me think through what feminist pedagogy means in varied space. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Michelle Jarman and Dr. Jacquelyn Bridgeman for modeling what superb antiracist and feminist pedagogy can look like in rural and predominantly White spaces; they have taught me an enormous amount in a short time about how to do the work that we do and how to resist burnout while doing it.

“Resisting burnout: bell hooks’ pedagogy of hope and teaching antiracist feminism online at the University of Wyoming during the Covid-19 pandemic,”  
by Samantha L. Vandermeade

In 2020, I began teaching feminist, antiracist courses in the School of Culture, Gender, and Social Justice at the University of Wyoming (UW). I felt prepared, as a white lesbian from the rural South and as a feminist whiteness studies scholar, to teach at the only university in an extremely white and conservative state. When instruction shifted online due to the pandemic, I felt equally prepared, having trained at a university that leads innovation in online pedagogy.

I was wrong on both counts, and I found myself wearied to the point of “spiritual crisis” (hooks, 2003, p. 183).

bell hooks’ pedagogy of hope guides my reflections on the struggle of building trust among students while teaching online. Embracing hope is the only way to escape burnout and resist accepting it as the inevitable consequence of the challenges we face as feminist educators.

In 2003, hooks wrote that education faces a significant loss of community and connection. This was true when hooks wrote it, it remains true, and the pandemic made it painfully clear.

We enter online spaces divided—by divergent identities and ideologies, by time and space. Vitriolic divisiveness thrives on the internet and spills into the online classroom. The pandemic exacerbated existing feelings of isolation, disconnection, and distrust among young people and fueled online discord. This discord is especially explosive where it concerns the already touchy subjects of gender, sexuality, and race.

Navigating these subjects as an educator is especially difficult in socially homogenous and conservative spaces like Wyoming. Previously, disclosing my queerness to students built trust; here, it fuels suspicion and sparks homophobia. Personal transparency had illustrated my humanity; now, it underscores my strangeness. Despite my whiteness (a significant buffer that my colleagues of color don’t enjoy), to many Wyomingites, my feminist progressivism makes me a racial turncoat.

As I quickly discovered, I was ill-prepared to build the mutual trust required to effectively teach material that generates resistance among students whose backgrounds and experiences often primed them to distrust people like me—queer, feminist, ‘elite’—in the pedagogically difficult online environment.

I was equally unprepared for the devastating burnout I experienced when students resisted both the material and my pedagogy. Some students remained open to a feminist education, even thirsted for it, but many more reacted with disinterest, distrust, rage, and/or rejection. The frequency and intensity of their hostility wearied

“Resisting burnout: bell hooks’ pedagogy of hope and teaching antiracist feminism online at the University of Wyoming during the Covid-19 pandemic,”  
by Samantha L. Vandermeade

me, and “my capacity to cope...in a constructive way diminish[ed]” (hooks, 2003, p. 13).

Following several dispiriting student interactions in spring 2022, I learned that the state senate passed an amendment with potentially devastating implications for UW’s gender studies department and for gender-related courses and programming. The state senate’s move is part of a larger, global attack on gender studies, and other departments across the U.S. have been subject to similar measures.

Like any feminist, I am accustomed to political attacks; however, in years past, the connections I built with students and the positive impact my work had on their lives sustained me. Now, the personal battles I faced in my online classroom and the legislature’s political assault converged like fronts in a war that I was doomed to lose.

Yet, to view my students and the legislature as two factions of the same enemy is diametrically opposed to a pedagogy of hope. hooks (2003) says, “profound cynicism is at the core of dominator culture” (p. 11). To embrace such cynicism forsakes hope, upholds domination, and resists transformation.

Transformative pedagogy values “wholeness over division” (hooks, 2003, p. 49). The ‘division’ so many of my students perceive between them and me threatens attempts to create wholeness in the classroom; the gulf that needs spanning is wider than anywhere else I’ve taught. Here, the challenge lies in creating *wholeness* while simultaneously refusing to allow ‘sameness’ to subsume the transformative possibility of *difference*. Yet, to create ‘wholeness,’ we must first create trust and closeness between us and our students—without annihilating difference. How is this possible?

hooks (2003) provides the answer: when we “teach with love” (p. 133) we are able to respond to students’ individual concerns while simultaneously integrating them into community. Feminist online pedagogy already requires us to build closeness and prioritize care, or we risk losing our students before we begin. Teaching at places like UW requires even more love and care as we seek to overcome higher levels of distrust and suspicion.

This is not without risk. Just as we ask of our students, we must “honor the fact” (hooks, 2003, p. 64) that we often learn and grow in circumstances where we feel unsafe and reject the notion that conflict means “community is not possible” (p. 135). These are lessons I must (re)learn: to embrace conflict without losing hope in the process that creates it; to resist allowing the frustration conflict creates to

“Resisting burnout: bell hooks’ pedagogy of hope and teaching antiracist feminism online at the University of Wyoming during the Covid-19 pandemic,” by Samantha L. Vandermeade

subsume my commitment to “the work of love” (p. 133); and to (re)commit to that work even though it is difficult, only intermittently successful, and never finished.

A pedagogy of hope reminds us that “subjugated knowledges [are] liberating” (hooks, 2003, p. 7)—especially when those students who are most likely to resist those knowledges can be convinced to consider them. Unlearning epistemologies of domination is a “practice of freedom” (hooks, p. 72) and can spark a commitment to justice for those white, male, cisgender, and/or straight students whom we *do* reach. Unlearning domination and choosing to resist it brings students into community and is necessary for transformative education and social justice. Choosing hope also reminds us that “every system has a gap...a place of possibility” (hooks, p. 23). The gaps to be found at UW may be smaller than elsewhere, but that doesn’t make feminist education less necessary there; in fact, it makes the work I do *more* crucial. With this realization came hope.

Even the most resistant of our students are not our enemies nor should they fuel our burnout. “If we want change, we must be willing to teach” (hooks, 2003, p. 76). To unlearn domination, and to encourage our students in that work, feminist educators must “cultivate a spirit of hopefulness about the capacity of individuals to change” (hooks, p. 73). Still, serving our students in this way is “an act of critical resistance” (hooks, p. 90) that stokes a tenacious and ferocious backlash against feminist education. Our capacity to hope must be just as ferocious.

“Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power over time” (hooks, 2003, p. xiv). A feminist pedagogy of hope urges us to find and enter the “open spaces in closed systems” (hooks, p. 133) and fill them with love. If we don’t, we reinforce the erroneous belief that our institutions cannot be changed. We must be open to the vulnerability that hope engenders and resist putting on the armor that cynicism offers against the sharp cuts of disappointment that accompany teaching social justice in difficult times and spaces. A pedagogy of hope reminds us that despair precludes the possibility of creating the “life-sustaining communities of resistance” (hooks, p. 12) that are not only crucial to creating change, but which provide our only refuge from burnout as we continue our feminist work.

“Resisting burnout: bell hooks’ pedagogy of hope and teaching antiracist feminism online at the University of Wyoming during the Covid-19 pandemic,”  
by Samantha L. Vandermeade

### References

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.