

February 2023

Editor's Introduction: Honoring the Immeasurable: bell hooks' Feminist Pedagogy in Teaching

Kristin Comeforo
University of Hartford, comeforo@hartford.edu

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



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Comeforo, Kristin (2023) "Editor's Introduction: Honoring the Immeasurable: bell hooks' Feminist Pedagogy in Teaching," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss1/2>

This Introduction to Special Issue 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.

On December 15, 2021, the news did not need a hashtag to go viral, it simply needed a name—bell hooks. While we had said her name countless times before, these @mentions sang like eulogies, filled with grief, loss, and yet, hope and resolve. Twitter lit up with quotes, visual tributes, and personal testimonies of the impact hooks had made on people as teachers, students, and more broadly, human beings who were committed to the “counter-hegemonic act” (hooks, 1994b, p. 2) of learning.

I remember coming to bell hooks through her work on representation. I bought *Outlaw Culture* in a lesbian bookstore in 1996 as I was coming out. Admittedly, I judged the book by its cover, which resonated with my lived experience as an “outlaw,” particularly in the women’s room on campus, where my masculine presentation was met with side-eyed glances and under-the-breath accusations: this is the *LADIES*’ room. Yearning for belonging, I came to hooks for personal reasons, “to find communities of resistance, places where [I would] know [I was] not alone” (hooks, 2015, p. 213). I took away this, and more. Over the last 26 years I’ve read, and re-read, hooks as I cultivate a pedagogy that engages teacher and students as equally whole human beings who bring their full selves to the collective task of unlearning and relearning in pursuit of liberation. Thousands of well-worn, dog-eared pages later, with too many notes scrawled in the margins to count, I still return to the opening pages of *Outlaw Culture* as a guide for what I want our community to experience as we step into our classroom: to “feel the fun and excitement of learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more” (hooks, 1994a, p. 2).

In the dark shadow cast by bell’s passing I was immobilized. Eloquent eulogies and tributes ricocheted across social media but for me, words stuck in my throat and my fingers poised motionless over my keyboard. I could not adequately capture the depth of my gratitude, the level of impact, and the devastation I felt around the life and loss of bell hooks. In that moment I knew that the only salve for our collective pain was the work of hooks herself, and the voices of those who have used it, to find freedom in their teaching and learning. Qiana Cutts quickly joined as co-editor, and these special issues were born. The overwhelming response to our call for abstracts was heartening evidence of how beloved bell hooks was (and is) to our teaching community, and apropos to hooks’ own pedagogy, gave us “hope” that if we continue to follow hooks’ lead, education will indeed lead us towards freedom and liberation. Thanks to the unwavering commitment of *Feminist Pedagogy*’s Editors Emily Ryalls and Rachel E. Silverman to honoring hooks’ legacy, we were able to bring to you two volumes of *Honoring the Immeasurable: bell hooks’ Feminist Pedagogy in Teaching*.

While the authors in this volume highlight different aspects of hooks’ feminist pedagogy of engaged teaching and learning, collectively, they center hooks’ assertion that teaching and learning are practices of freedom and that classrooms are radical spaces of possibilities (hooks, 1994b). hooks invites us, as teachers and scholars, to always and actively question *what is* and *what must be* (hooks, 1994) and in the answers find transformative possibilities and pathways towards change.

The transformative potential of hooks’ pedagogy is highlighted in our Original Teaching Activities, all of which center students’ experiences and voices in confronting the systemic oppression and injustice that occurs in their everyday lives. Melissa Chomintra locates

oppression in the library, and provides us with a powerful lessons on how knowledge production is dominated by white, cis, hetero males. Through this Original Teaching Activity, students in Chomintra's library classroom find "knowledge justice" by reconceptualizing who can and cannot produce, and what counts as, knowledge.

Activities presented by Ashley Garcia and Maria Guajardo tap into hooks' belief that engaged pedagogy not only requires "the union of mind, body, and spirit" (hooks, 1994, p. 18) but also "values student expression" (hooks, p. 20). Drawing from hooks' centering of self & identity in the social analysis necessary for changing political circumstances, Garcia encourages students to tap into experiential knowledge and interrogate their assumptions about privilege through a "Privilege Comic" activity. Guajardo also centers lived experience in her journaling activity, presenting an activity on journaling as a pedagogical tool for engaging students in critical inquiry and praxis. She argues that "new knowledge emerges when learners employ their point of view as a reference point."

Our Critical Commentaries hone in on hooks' vision of the classroom as a radical space of possibility. Laura Irwin, Laura Prado, and Regina Lee, for instance, deploy hooks' thoughts to rethink the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom in terms of communicative possibilities rather than the creation and control of assimilated, gendered citizens. Molly Wiant Cummins turns to engaged pedagogy as a means for "welcoming possibility" as we return to the post-Covid, "new normal" classroom. Cummins recounts a (re)turn to teaching "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process" as a means for re-centering the body in her classroom.

In each of their pieces, Kelly Opdycke and Samantha Vandermeade reflect on possibilities in the classroom under the dark cloud of despair that hangs over our (post) Covid classrooms. Opdycke answers hooks' calls for professors to prioritize their own self-actualization and well-being. They reflect on their own experience of "teaching depressed," and use hooks' ideas around "hope" to sketch out strategies to emerge from this state and better serve her students. Similarly, Samantha Vandermeade recounts the despair, devastation, and burnout that ensued when students resisted both the material and her pedagogy. In hooks (2003), she found guidance and hope: when we "teach with love" (p. 133) we are able to respond to students' individual concerns while simultaneously integrating them into community.

This guidance—to teach towards love and hope—is perhaps the most cherished gift we have received from the immeasurable wisdom of bell hooks.

References

- hooks, b. (1994a). *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1994b). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2015). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Routledge.