

crossing boundaries, reaching out:
the public scholarship of
bell hooks

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In 1993 feminist cultural critic bell hooks interviewed hip-hop artist Ice Cube for SPIN magazine. The two talked about child-rearing, marriage, violence, white supremacy and *Boyz in the Hood*, sharing personal stories about their lives and their families, debating and arguing but always being respectful of each other. The interview is written in casual, conversational African-American language and returns, again and again, to the importance of Black people committed to liberation communicating across differences. It is hard to imagine many other academics, particularly feminist academics, comfortably talking politics with a rapper, especially one usually portrayed as a notorious sexist. But hooks has consciously avoided academic stereotypes. Any perusal of her extremely prolific written work -- she has published more than 20 books and typically releases one every year -- shows her deep commitment to the Black community, feminism, and progressive activism. From the name she writes under (that of her great-grandmother, a woman she greatly admires) to her lively writing style and varied subject matter, it is impossible to separate her politics from her work. The antithesis of the "Ivory Tower" academic, hooks is theorizing, writing, teaching, and acting in public, and is committed to putting her ideas into practice.

Although hooks (lower-case; she prefers it written that way to distinguish herself from the original Bell) has top-of-the-line academic credentials-- educated at Stanford and Santa Cruz, teaching appointments at Yale and Oberlin, her first book written at age nineteen-- she doesn't see herself as an academic. Rather, hooks frames herself as an intellectual, someone political, social, and community-minded. She argues that the academy's emphasis on professionalism, which includes using complicated jargon and only publishing in small journals targeted to other academics, limits people who would like to speak to audiences outside the university.

Academics, she believes, are constrained in what they can say and encouraged to uphold the status quo in order to succeed in their field. Hooks is a self-proclaimed revolutionary activist and has little interest in keeping the world the way it is; she is focused on social change. Rather, she sees herself as a “dissident”, crossing boundaries. She writes to different audiences, reads across disciplines and works on a wide variety of subjects.

In her book Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life, written with Harvard professor Cornel West, hooks writes that an intellectual is “somebody who trades in ideas in their vital bearing on a wider political culture”, by “transgressing discursive frontiers”. In other words, intellectuals examine things that matter to the world at large, whether that be employment, Madonna, interracial dating or teaching, all subjects hooks has tackled at one point or another. This concept of intellectual doesn’t necessitate holding a university degree, or even higher education. Instead, hooks believes that the mark of the intellectual is talking in all sorts of ways, rather than sticking with the complicated and sophisticated academic jargon that can be incomprehensible to university outsiders. This is extremely important to hooks, as she sees remaining accessible and relevant as showing solidarity with feminist liberation and anti-racist struggle. If an academic writes about esoteric things that the average person cannot understand, even if the ideas are very relevant and interesting, the academic is not helping larger communities to learn and grow. Hooks writes in her anti-racist book Killing Rage that “there is no politically neutral intellectual work.” While academia can avoid politics and social issues, the intellectual is inherently involved with them.

Hooks is often labeled a “Black public intellectual”, a term that she has criticized. She writes that it is an easy way to dismiss black scholars by labeling them as “Black”, as if what they had to say was not relevant to everybody. She thinks that since most Black people working

within the academy have a minimal direct impact on the Black community and American society overall, it diminishes the importance of their work and makes people think that Black intellectuals as a whole are useless. Instead of this isolated academic stance, hooks calls for collective intellectual work that contributes to communal resistance and struggle, that begins a dialogue between writers, theorists, activists and the public.

I believe that this concept of the intellectual is in line with the idea of *public* scholarship, that people working within the academy should strive to study relevant subjects, make people aware of their findings, and engage in discussions with their communities. It's important to note that bell hooks' work, taken as a whole, is very public-minded, as she talks frankly about race, gender, class, employment, capitalism and other issues relevant to almost all Americans. But I think hooks is an excellent example of a public scholar because she embodies the phrase *the personal is political*; she makes strategic choices about how to do her work, and these choices are based on her considerable understanding of feminist and critical race theory. It is her commitment to accessibility, her work on teaching, and her writing on literacy that I think contribute the most to an overall understanding of what it means to be a public scholar. Her commitment to accessibility shows clearly in three particular areas: the language, form, and subject matter of her writing.

Bell hooks' language is clear and readable. It is both *polyvocal* (talking in many different ways) and *polyphonic* (sounding different). She uses academic language when appropriate, and conversational language at other times. This "code-switching" (meaning the ability to change the way you talk based on context; for example, the way you might speak differently with your friends than in a job interview) is strategic, and based on audience and subject matter. For example, her interview with Ice Cube uses Black American English, which is appropriate

considering it was originally published in the music magazine *Spin*, whose audience is mostly teenagers and young music fans. The ideas in the essay are still very sophisticated and intelligent, but are written in a style appropriate to who might read it. Here's an excerpt from that interview:

"hooks: Part of what I try to do as a teacher, a professor, is to show people just 'cause you're a professor and you got a PhD, you don't have to be all tired, with no style and with no presence. If I come on like I don't have no style, then I'm not really being somebody that black kids are gonna wanna say 'Yeah, this is interesting, you know, I could still have my shit together and be this, I could still be down and be this.'"

When writing for a more traditional academic audience, she uses a smart, readable style that does not need to fall back on jargon to express complicated ideas. In an essay about the celebrated African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, she writes:

"For the white art world to recognize Basquiat, he had to sacrifice those parts of himself they would not be interested in or fascinated by. Black but assimilated, Basquiat claimed the space of the exotic as though it were a new frontier, waiting only to be colonized. He made of that cultural space within whiteness (the land of the exotic) a location where he would be re-membered in history even as he simultaneously created art that unsparingly interrogates such mutilation and self-distortion."

This essay is more traditional academic criticism, but it is far from unreadable. The interesting thing about these two passages is that they appear in the same book, Outlaw Culture, a fascinating collection of essays on popular culture. Code-switching is a talent that almost all of

us have to one degree or another; however, most academics choose not to use these multiple voices in their professional work, instead sticking with specialized jargon. This ability to tailor her language based on what she is writing about and for who is one of the reasons that hooks has become so popular with people outside of the academy, and she does it very deliberately.

The form of bell hooks' writing is similarly strategically planned. For example, she often incorporates anecdotes and details of her life into her writing to better illustrate what she means, a strategy that she refers to as *praxis*. These anecdotes and stories are a way for hooks to resist traditional, patriarchal discourse which often writes out the voices of women, especially women of color. Relating her rich and varied experiences allows hooks to carve out spaces for her own voice. Praxis is also a very effective teaching tool; it is much easier to understand a complicated concept if it can be explained through a story, or you can relate it to your own life. In these stories, she does not shy away from emotion. Her book All About Love: New Visions is deeply personal. She writes about her mother, her partners, and her best friends, and speaks honestly and frankly about love and pain and loss. In the academy, writers are not supposed to create personal work; in fact, we are discouraged from even using the first person, and instead are encouraged to adopt a formal, scientific style. Hooks' warmth makes her writing about sexism and racism much more effective, as she transforms these concepts from stiff theoretical abstractions to lived experiences, to systems which have effects on the lives of real people.

Hooks also experiments with format. Flip through many of her books and you'll see interviews, dialogues, essays, and personal stories. Rather than structuring her work in long, dense essays, she wants people to pick up one of her books, read a paragraph on the subway or before bedtime, and get a complete idea from it. While professors and graduate students often have hours to read, hooks recognizes that everyday people often do not.

Although bell hooks took her PhD in English, she chose to write cultural criticism, particularly about sexism, racism, and oppression, rather than literary theory. She maintains that these subjects are more relevant to people's lives, and interest in, say, movie criticism is not limited to people within the university. This allows her to experiment with a wide variety of genres, some of which are very unusual for an academic writer, but which let her reach a wider variety of people. For example, she has written several very good self-help books, which are still in line with her politics although the genre itself is not usually seen as particularly progressive. Her book Sisters of the Yam is aimed at Black women in recovery, with the goal of helping people to heal so that they can work more effectively within their communities. All About Love discusses the idea of love in a culture that encourages people to treat relationships as commodities and romance as a substitute for honest emotion. For similar reasons, she has written children's books, such as Happy to be Nappy which celebrates a little Black girl's natural hair in the context of our white-normative beauty culture. Her 2000 book Feminism Is For Everybody was explicitly written as an attempt to market feminist theory as easy to understand and useful. Each of these formats appeals to a different group of people; someone who might never pick up a book of feminist theory might buy a children's book, but each of her works contains similar thoughtful, progressive ideas.

Hooks' work on pedagogy, or the theory of teaching, is another way that she reaches out to the public. Although in the academy, teaching is usually de-emphasized and relegated to the service realm, hooks has written two well-received books on teaching multiculturalism, community, diversity, and equality, ideals that can be applied to high school education, college seminars or Sunday school. The Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, a former mentor, has been a great influence on hooks, and she has adopted his concept of "critical consciousness" as something to

aspire to. Basically, Fiere and hooks believe that teachers should strive to help their students develop critical thinking skills as a priority, rather than the current emphasis on memorization and standardized test taking. Charlotte Bunch writes that critical thinking is “to think analytically about society, to question the way things are, or to consider how things could be different.” Developing a critical eye is a precursor to the social and political work that hooks believes is crucial, and her commitment to it is evident both in her pedagogical work and her own teaching.

Taking a class with bell hooks must be a heady and unusual experience. She writes that teachers should use power in a way that is not dominating in the classroom, rather than setting themselves up as a hierarchical authority figure. For example, she talks about “situational pedagogy”, adapting her teaching style to each group of students that she works with. Returning to *polyvocality*, hooks recognizes that many students speak in a way that is not standard Anglo-American English. While she recognizes that knowing how to speak and write in this way is important for success in the business world, the legal world, and so forth, she allows her students to write and speak in their own languages and vernacular as long as they can translate to the other students. These students, then, learn that their way of speaking is just as valid as any other, while at the same time, the rest of the class learns that Anglo-American language is not superior to other forms of speaking. This allows hooks to maintain her commitment to the validity of all forms of language while encouraging her students to learn the same code-switching which she employs so strategically.

Hooks also writes and speaks about the importance of literacy. Her book Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center has a chapter titled “Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda”. In it, she argues that women and men were excluded from the early feminist movement and progressive activism in general because of illiteracy. A lack of reading or writing skills makes it

hard for people to read flyers that advertise meetings, to use the Web site to find out voting information, or even simply to get a good job. Hooks believes that mainstream activists do not understand that literacy is a privilege, and one that is not available to everyone. She particularly targets academic feminist theorists, maintaining that their use of difficult language has caused a split between feminist activism, which is often practiced by working-class non-academics, and feminist theory, which is seen as widely irrelevant. Not only does feminist theory in the academy need to come down to earth, feminists as a whole need to undertake literacy as a progressive issue. She outlines a few ideas: opening neighborhood literacy centers, talking to people in different communities, teaching in accessible venues like the YMCA; and making sure to translate complicated feminist ideas into plain language.

The impact of bell hooks' work has mostly been felt in the public consciousness and her books are very popular with non-academics and younger students. She writes that she gets a lot of letters from Black men in jail, for example, or Black women "living in the middle of nowhere." As it is very rare for a traditional academic to get these types of responses, her accessibility and readable, fiery language must be succeeding in its goals. Even within the academy, her work is widely taught, especially in women's studies and Black studies classes. (I first encountered *Ain't I A Woman* in an Africana Studies class during my sophomore year of college.) Hooks also publishes in the mainstream press quite often, writing in music magazines like *Vibe* and *Spin*, appearing on the Op-Ed page of national newspapers and being interviewed by feminist presses. Overall, she continues to serve as an inspiration to a generation of scholars, writers, activists, artists, and people who want a model of how to integrate their theoretical, political views with the practice of their daily lives.

Further Reading

Books

Note that this list only includes a few of her books. She's written more than 20 and puts out a new book almost every year!

Cultural Criticism

Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations (Routledge, 1994)

Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies (Routledge, 1996)

Feminist Theory

Feminism is for Everybody (South End Press, 2000)

Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (South End Press, 1984)

Race and Racism

Killing Rage: Ending Racism (Owl Books, 1995)

Aint' I a Woman: Black women and feminism (South End Press, 1981)

Self-Help

Sisters of the Yam: Black women and self-recovery (South End Press, 1993)

All about Love: New Visions (Perennial, 2000)

Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem (Atria Books, 2002)

Pedagogy

Teaching to Transgress (Routledge, 1994)

Teaching Community (Routledge, 2003)

Web Sites

<http://www.allaboutbell.com/>

A great source of interviews, essays and articles about hooks, written by a fan.

<http://www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal/hooks.htm>

Critical Thinkers: Bell Hooks Resources

A nice annotated bibliography of Web sources, managed by the folks at eJournal.

Olson, Gary. (1994) "bell hooks and the Politics of Literacy: A Conversation." JAC 14.1. This essay can be retrieved online at <http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/14.1/Articles/1.htm>

Bauer, Michelle. (2000). "Implementing a Liberatory Feminist Pedagogy: Bell Hooks' strategies for Transforming the Classroom." MELUS, fall/winter. Can be accessed online at

http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2278/is_2000_Fall-Winter/ai_74483369

Powell, Kevin. (1995). "Uncut Funk: Kevin Powell Interviews bell hooks". Vibe Magazine, May 1995. Available online at <http://www.allaboutbell.com/vibe.htm>