

## **You Said It Wouldn't Hurt: Embodied Pedagogy**

"We are all subjects in history. We must return to embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others." - bell hooks <sup>1</sup>

This essay is written from my experiences as both a student and teacher in American public and private schools, colleges and universities. They are memories of my own education and my desire to teach in ways that resist the forms of power and domination that I experienced in my educational life. The form of the essay uses personal testimony to serve as a catalyst to discuss key ideas advanced by writer, academic and theorist bell hooks and by her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*.

### **Does anyone have a tampon? or embodied teaching**

I entered the classroom wearing pristine white pants covered in what looked like a giant menstrual stain. Deep red paint saturated my inner thighs and backside. Standing in a dark relief of color against a white background, I was about to teach my first university level art class to graduate students. I had envisioned this moment many times, expecting perhaps a gasp or expressions of shock, laughter or disgust from my students. I imagined myself then launching into introducing the class, *Points of Penetration: The Grotesque Body and Humor in Contemporary Art*, without immediate explanation, while my menstruating brown female body took center stage.

My first day of teaching began with an exaggerated display of vulnerability. I was attempting to take a theoretical subject and show how it can also be understood by and through the body. The course itself was about using the frame of the grotesque to talk about power and non-normative bodies. Building on the theories of the grotesque by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, it was a course about embodied knowledge and how that relates to art. So beginning there, I felt it was important to highlight my body as the teacher of the course. If I wanted my students to not assume a passive and disembodied relationship to the material, if I wanted them to take risks, then I had to begin by setting an example for our classroom.

But reality is always different from one's imagination. The first setback I experienced a few hours before the course was set to begin, only two students had enrolled. It would surely be canceled with such low enrollment but I decided to persist with my performance regardless. Just before class, short of breath and full of anxiety I changed into my teaching costume and walked out of the bathroom and began setting up my computer. As students flowed in, I quickly realized I had set up in the wrong room. I was in the room across the hall. These students and the professor curiously stared at me. I rushed to explain that I was teaching a class on the grotesque as if that clarified everything - all the while gathering my computer and belongings. Shifting rooms, I was full of doubt and self criticism and certain of my impending failure. What was I thinking? In which universe did I think this was a good idea, let alone an important gesture. One student walked in and then the other without reaction and without response. I

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<sup>1</sup>hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, p. 139

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welcomed them formally as if I wasn't greeting them with a giant menstrual stain between my legs. They expressed no outward reaction except to exchange silent glances.

At this moment I realized I had lost the key to the projector issued to me earlier that day. I couldn't conduct class without it. This meant I had to leave our classroom, exit the building onto a downtown San Franciscan street, cross another and after half a block enter through the school's main entrance into its newly designed main building of open classrooms, and walk to its rear to the Audio Visual department where I was greeted by two women with wide smiles. Again I explained I was teaching a class on the grotesque, as if that explained everything. With newly issued key in hand I continued back the way I had come. Along the way I was high-fived by a woman who squealed in delight that she loved my pants. Most just stared or others perhaps offended, or embarrassed, looked away and pretended not to see. I returned and started class. I can't remember what happened after I returned to class but the following week I had a group of eager students wanting to add my course.

### **Can everyone hear me? or speaking from the margins**

Earlier that year I had met with a more senior tenured white female professor from the same California art school that had awarded me an MFA almost ten years before. We talked about my teaching there in the fall. She shared that of the 20 or so tenured painting faculty, the largest department in the school, only 4 were women. I had this on my mind when I started thinking about how and what I would teach in the very institution that had profoundly silenced me as a student. As one of the small scattering of people of color in an otherwise white and wealthy private art school in a predominantly poor and black city in northern California, I still managed to graduate with distinction without ever having uttered a word in my courses.

By the time I had arrived in graduate school, my silence was well developed in reaction to my schooling in the U.S. and the multiple forms of racial and sexual harassment I had experienced. This harassment focused on my appearance, smell, the questioning of my gender, my non-Christian name and my place of origin. Though having attended and lived in overwhelmingly white schools and communities all of my life, I was not prepared me for the elitism and unwritten social codes of the affluent classes with whom my private art school brought me into frequent contact.

I remember sitting in the graduate directors office, feeling justifiably proud to be the first artist from my school in 12 years to be accepted into Skowhegan, a prestigious east coast summer art residency, one of the oldest and most respected in the country established by American artists just after World War II. Every art school in the U.S. had a matching fellowship program with Skowhegan to ensure that their graduate students can attend the elite and expensive 9 week program at no cost to them. Every art school but mine. It had been so long since any of its students had gained entrance to the competitive program, it had stopped setting aside money in its budget.

That day, the graduate director was making calls on my behalf trying to shake administrators and wealthy friends of the school out of their complacency. He was also trying to find me money for my travel expenses. I remember sitting silently across his desk listening to him describe me as a good charitable cause to other people. "Does she have need? Does she have need?! Her parents work in factories!" He spoke as if I wasn't there. At that moment I saw myself as I was seen by others. the pride I had felt at gaining entrance to Skowhegan, quickly evaporated and

was replaced by something far more consistent with what it felt like trying to attend school there. I felt unredeemable. A mixture of shabbiness and poverty seemed imprinted on my brown skin. I had developed an early sense of what DuBois termed *Double Consciousness* when it came to race and being racialized, but it was new to experience through the lens of class simultaneous to race.

### **Stumbling in the dark or Teaching 101**

Returning to the scene of the crime so many years later, I never considered replicating the oppressive language and structures I had learned. I had to quickly recover the voice I lost as a student and create a new kind of classroom that operates without hierarchal expressions of power that often surround knowledge production. Of course, the problem was that I had no idea how to do this.

Intuitively, and perhaps because of the focus of my work as an artist that I had been developing independently for many years while I lived in New York, I decided to focus on two things - the body and shifting the center of power in the classroom -away from me and placing it with my students. The body and rethinking power were the focus for all of my courses with both graduate and undergraduate students, whether I was teaching theoretical courses like *Points of Penetration: The Grotesque body and Humor in Contemporary Art* or *You Said It Wouldn't Hurt: The Body Between Painting and Performance* or more traditional studio-based courses like Advanced or Introductory Painting.

Designing the courses around the model of a research group shifted the idea that knowledge was only produced by me as the teacher. This was scary for many reasons. It meant having to give up control, allowing my students to see my weaknesses as well as my strengths, and more generally it necessitated being in the present moment. My model was based on the premise that experiential knowledge was something we all brought and our studies and work could benefit from this shared horizontally produced knowledge. I could bring one part of this to the table but each member of the course, as part of a community was responsible for building on this, and using our life experiences as a way to engage with the material at hand was one possible and important way of deepening our relationship to what was being studied.

I also remember clearly that I wanted teaching to yield what my art practice was yielding. I wanted teaching to offer the possibility of self growth, reflection and community. I created classes that were extensions of my own artistic research, as a way to further strengthen my own understanding, but also to grow a community of artists who could share this investment in political and aesthetic ideas. I wanted to grow with my students. This desire to also grow and transform while teaching created conflict because teaching is often constructed as a one way exercise where the teacher bestows knowledge and the students receive it. This model doesn't allow for anything close to mutual growth which is at the basis of many theories of liberatory education.

I had many successes and failures. Among the successes, former students continue to publicly cite my courses as having a significant impact on their growth and success as artists. I am in touch and collaborate with former students as they've transitioned from their roles as student to professional artists. And the fact that I took them very seriously as artists when they were my students, effected the greatest change in our relationships. Whether I met them at age 18 or

returning to school at age 50, I saw them as individuals with unique life stories. They were part of my artistic community with something important to contribute to me and to their peers. I refused to patronize them and assume a position of superior knowledge. Seeing a real person attempting to put down the mask of authority, affected their ability to see themselves in a new way. Ultimately, my experience of teaching helped restore my faith in people. It is impossible to teach well if you yourself don't see the possibility for positive growth and change in the world.

Though the successes far outweighed the disappointments, it didn't lessen the pain of failing. I was unprepared in many ways to periodically contend with sexism and racism directed at me from my students. Some students were desperate for a strong father or mother figure and didn't want to grapple with any new experience of agency in the classroom. And others trained into passive consumption were not interested in the actual labor involved in this kind of approach. I personally struggled with knowing when and how much to lead. I was often holding back worried of misusing my power.

### **Where have you been all my life? or finding intellectual kinship**

It would be more than a year of teaching experimentally, of using my classrooms as a social laboratory for democratizing power, before I found bell hook's *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*. I wept with relief and recognition reading her words. Though acquainted with bell hooks' writings on race and representation related to contemporary art, I was unfamiliar with her work on pedagogy. My friend and former housemate, a feminist painter, handed me a copy of *Teaching to Transgress*, after hearing about my many trials in the classroom. Hooks gave me a language to describe what I was doing intuitively, hit or miss, without a pedagogical or theoretical frame on which to base it. hooks allowed me to see my efforts as part of a larger history of engaged pedagogy linked to global liberation movements.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks distills many important strategies and observations from her own experiences with teaching. She also cites two main teachers for helping her shape her way to live with, teach and be taught by others - Paolo Friere, the late Brazilian revolutionary educational theorist and the Vietnamese buddhist activist monk, Thich Naht Hahn. Friere seemed to represent something of a beacon of hope and possibility for hooks as a student struggling against hierarchical academic settings that serve the reproduction of systems of domination and bourgeois hegemonic codes of behavior. The writings of bell hooks played a similar role for me.

Friere labels traditional education as a banking system of education where knowledge is characterized by the memorization and recitation of learned facts. Knowledge is seen as a gift given by those who are deemed knowledgable to those who they consider to be lacking knowledge. "Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry," writes Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Both Friere and Hanh advance ideas of reflection combined with action, but whereas Friere focuses on the mind, hooks cites Hahn's focus on pedagogy with a holistic emphasis on being well in mind, body and spirit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, p. 14

To educate as a practice of freedom, is a way of teaching that is open to everyone. But it will come easiest to those willing to acknowledge that teaching also has a sacred function.<sup>3</sup> Care for the self, including one's soul, is fundamental to this process of liberation and transformation for ourselves and our students. Our liberation is interdependent and is only possible through mutual labor and growth. hooks writes, "Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks...When professors bring their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate academic material. But most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit."

To teach as a practice of freedom also means giving up what hook's calls our society's addiction to lying and denial. <sup>4</sup> It requires a level of honesty about the world we live, the values we hold, and privilege created through another's domination. Our lives are governed by an economic system that cannot operate without creating a vast underclass of people who are economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised. Poverty, hunger, environmental collapse and other brutal economic disparities between the global north and south are by design and not simply some unfortunate quirk of fate. These designed structures of inequality affect certain groups more directly than others and this is something that cannot be ignored when we seek to change the conditions of how institutional knowledge is produced and shared.

The classroom, in the philosophical context of western dualism, is a space predicated on the belief of a split between mind and body. According to bell hooks, those of us trained in this form of thinking, enter the classroom to teach and learn as if only our minds are present. To call attention to our bodies is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that is created by white, capitalist patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> For many years I wanted nothing more than to deny the existence of my body, which I saw as the source of my experiences of intimate, social and political aggressions. My growth as a person, as an artist and as a teacher has been contingent upon identifying these systems and locating them in the world rather than in myself. If we go back to the body as a way to know the world, then we could say that I stopped swallowing what had been making me sick. Teaching has been central to my process of healing.

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell, Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, p. 13

<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell, Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, p. 28

<sup>5</sup> hooks, bell, Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, p. 191