

# Teaching to Transgress

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Education as the  
Practice of Freedom

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### Paulo Freire

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This is a playful dialogue with myself, Gloria Watkins, talking with bell hooks, my writing voice. I wanted to speak about Paulo and his work in this way for it afforded me an intimacy—a familiarity—I do not find it possible to achieve in the essay. And here I have found a way to share the sweetness, the solidarity I talk about.

*Watkins:*

Reading your books *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, and *Talking Back*, it is clear that your development as a critical thinker has been greatly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. Can you speak about why his work has touched your life so deeply?

*hooks:*

Years before I met Paulo Freire, I had learned so much from his work, learned new ways of thinking about social reality that were liberatory. Often when university stu-

dents and professors read Freire, they approach his work from a voyeuristic standpoint, where as they read they see two locations in the work, the subject position of Freire the educator (whom they are often more interested in than the ideas or subjects he speaks about) and the oppressed/marginalized groups he speaks about. In relation to these two subject positions, they position themselves as observers, as outsiders. When I came to Freire's work, just at that moment in my life when I was beginning to question deeply and profoundly the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that takes place in the United States, I felt myself to be deeply identified with the marginalized peasants he speaks about, or with my black brothers and sisters, my comrades in Guinea-Bissau. You see, I was coming from a rural southern black experience, into the university, and I had lived through the struggle for racial desegregation and was in resistance without having a political language to articulate that process. Paulo 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." Really, it is difficult to find words adequate to explain how this statement was like a locked door—and I struggled within myself to find the key—and that struggle engaged me in a process of critical thought that was transformative. This experience positioned Freire in my mind and heart as a challenging teacher whose work furthered my own struggle against the colonizing process—the colonizing mind-set.

*GW:* In your work, you indicate an ongoing concern with the process of decolonization, particularly as it affects

African Americans living within the white supremacist culture of the United States. Do you see a link between the process of decolonization and Freire's focus on "conscientization"?

*bh:* Oh, absolutely. Because the colonizing forces are so powerful in this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, it seems that black people are always having to renew a commitment to a decolonizing political process that should be fundamental to our lives and is not. And so Freire's work, in its global understanding of liberation struggles, always emphasizes that this is the important initial stage of transformation—that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance. Again, this is one of the concepts in Freire's work—and in my own work—that is frequently misunderstood by readers in the United States. Many times people will say to me that I seem to be suggesting that it is enough for individuals to change how they think. And you see, even their use of the *enough* tells us something about the attitude they bring to this question. It has a patronizing sound, one that does not convey any heartfelt understanding of how a change in attitude (though not a completion of any transformative process) can be significant for colonized/oppressed people. Again and again Freire has had to remind readers that he never spoke of conscientization as an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis. In many different ways Freire articulates this. I like when he talks about the necessity of verifying in praxis what we know in consciousness:

That means, and let us emphasize it, that human beings do not get beyond the concrete situation, the condition in which they find themselves, only by their consciousness or their intentions—however good those intentions may be. The pos-

sibilities that I had for transcending the narrow limits of a five-by-two-foot cell in which I was locked after the April 1964 coup d'état were not sufficient to change my condition as a prisoner. I was always in the cell, deprived of freedom, even if I could imagine the outside world. But on the other hand, the praxis is not blind action, deprived of intention or of finality. It is action and reflection. Men and women are human beings because they are historically constituted as beings of praxis, and in the process they have become capable of transforming the world—of giving it meaning.

I think that so many progressive political movements fail to have lasting impact in the United States precisely because there is not enough understanding of “praxis.” This is what touches me about Antonio Faundez asserting in *Learning to Question* that

one of the things we learned in Chile in our early reflection on everyday life was that abstract political, religious or moral statements did not take concrete shape in acts by individuals. We were revolutionaries in the abstract, not in our daily lives. It seems to me essential that in our individual lives, we should day to day live out what we affirm.

It always astounds me when progressive people act as though it is somehow a naive moral position to believe that our lives must be a living example of our politics.

*GW:* There are many readers of Freire who feel that the sexist language in his work, which went unchanged even after the challenge of contemporary feminist movement and feminist critique, is a negative example. When you first read Freire what was your response to the sexism of his language?

*bh:* There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he (like other progressive Third World political leaders, intellectuals, critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi, etc.) constructs a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. For me this is always a source of anguish for it represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight. And yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone's (and feminists' in particular) capacity to learn from the insights. This is why it is difficult for me to speak about sexism in Freire's work; it is difficult to find a language that offers a way to frame critique and yet maintain the recognition of all that is valued and respected in the work. It seems to me that the binary opposition that is so much embedded in Western thought and language makes it nearly impossible to project a complex response. Freire's sexism is indicated by the language in his early works, notwithstanding that there is so much that remains liberatory. There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire's own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in the work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal.

*GW:* So you see no contradiction in your valuing of Freire's work and your commitment to feminist scholarship?

*bh:* It is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire's work (which I needed so that as a young reader of his work I did not passively absorb the worldview presented) and yet there are many other standpoints from which I approach his work that enable me to experience its value, that make it possible for that work to touch me at the very core of my being. In

talking with academic feminists (usually white women) who feel they must either dismiss or devalue the work of Freire because of sexism, I see clearly how our different responses are shaped by the standpoint that we bring to the work. I came to Freire thirsty, dying of thirst (in that way that the colonized, marginalized subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty), and I found in his work (and the work of Malcolm X, Fanon, etc.) a way to quench that thirst. To have work that promotes one's liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed. Think of the work as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water. For me this is an experience that corresponds very much to the way individuals of privilege respond to the use of water in the First World context. When you are privileged, living in one of the richest countries in the world, you can waste resources. And you can especially justify your disposal of something that you consider impure. Look at what most people do with water in this country. Many people purchase special water because they consider tap water unclean—and of course this purchasing is a luxury. Even our ability to see the water that come through the tap as unclean is itself informed by an imperialist consumer perspective. It is an expression of luxury and not just simply a response to the condition of water. If we approach the drinking of water that comes from the tap from a global perspective we would have to talk about it differently. We would have to consider what the vast majority of the people in the world who are thirsty must do to obtain water. Paulo's work has been living water for me.

*GW:* To what extent do you think your experience as an African American has made it possible for you to relate to Freire's work?

*bh:* As I already suggested, growing up in a rural area in the agrarian south, among black people who worked the land, I felt intimately linked to the discussion of peasant life in Freire's work and its relation to literacy. You know there are no history books that really tell the story of how difficult the politics of everyday life was for black people in the racially segregated south when so many folks did not read and were so often dependent on racist people to explain, to read, to write. And I was among a generation learning those skills, with an accessibility to education that was still new. The emphasis on education as necessary for liberation that black people made in slavery and then on into reconstruction informed our lives. And so Freire's emphasis on education as the practice of freedom made such immediate sense to me. Conscious of the need for literacy from girlhood, I took with me to the university memories of reading to folks, of writing for folks. I took with me memories of black teachers in the segregated school system who had been critical pedagogues providing us liberatory paradigms. It was this early experience of a liberatory education in Booker T. Washington and Crispus Attucks, the black schools of my formative years, that made me forever dissatisfied with the education I received in predominantly white settings. And it was educators like Freire who affirmed that the difficulties I had with the banking system of education, with an education that in no way addressed my social reality, were an important critique. Returning to the discussion of feminism and sexism, I want to say that I felt myself included in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the first Freire books I read, in a way that I never felt myself—in my experience as a rural black person—included in the first feminist books I read, works like *The Feminine Mystique* and *Born Female*. In the United States we do not talk enough about the way in which class shapes our

perspective on reality. Since so many of the early feminist books really reflected a certain type of white bourgeois sensibility, this work did not touch many black women deeply; not because we did not recognize the common experiences women shared, but because those commonalities were mediated by profound differences in our realities created by the politics of race and class.

*GW:* Can you speak about the relationship between Freire's work and the development of your work as feminist theorist and social critic?

*bh:* Unlike feminist thinkers who make a clear separation between the work of feminist pedagogy and Freire's work and thought, for me these two experiences converge. Deeply committed to feminist pedagogy, I find that, much like weaving a tapestry, I have taken threads of Paulo's work and woven it into that version of feminist pedagogy I believe my work as writer and teacher embodies. Again, I want to assert that it was the intersection of Paulo's thought and the lived pedagogy of the many black teachers of my girlhood (most of them women) who saw themselves as having a liberatory mission to educate us in a manner that would prepare us to effectively resist racism and white supremacy, that has had a profound impact on my thinking about the art and practice of teaching. And though these black women did not openly advocate feminism (if they even knew the word) the very fact that they insisted on academic excellence and open critical thought for young black females was an antisexist practice.

*GW:* Be more specific about the work you have done that has been influenced by Freire.

*bh:* Let me say that I wrote *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* when I was an undergraduate (though it was not published until years later). This book was the concrete manifestation of my struggle with the question of moving

from object to subject—the very question Paulo had posed. And it is so easy, now that many, if not most, feminist scholars are willing to recognize the impact of race and class as factors that shape female identity, for everyone to forget that early on feminist movement was not a location that welcomed the radical struggle of black women to theorize our subjectivity. Freire's work (and that of many other teachers) affirmed my right as a subject in resistance to define my reality. His writing gave me a way to place the politics of racism in the United States in a global context wherein I could see my fate linked with that of colonized black people everywhere struggling to decolonize, to transform society. More than in the work of many white bourgeois feminist thinkers, there was always in Paulo's work recognition of the subject position of those most disenfranchised, those who suffer the gravest weight of oppressive forces (with the exception of his not acknowledging always the specific gendered realities of oppression and exploitation). This was a standpoint which affirmed my own desire to work from a lived understanding of the lives of poor black women. There has been only in recent years a body of scholarship in the United States that does not look at the lives of black people through a bourgeois lens, a fundamentally radical scholarship that suggests that indeed the experience of black people, black females, might tell us more about the experience of women in general than simply an analysis that looks first, foremost, and always at those women who reside in privileged locations. One of the reasons that Paulo's book, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, has been important for my work is that it is a crucial example of how a privileged critical thinker approaches sharing knowledge and resources with those who are in need. Here is Paulo at one of those insightful moments. He writes:

Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis—in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously—can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped.

In American society where the intellectual—and specifically the black intellectual—has often assimilated and betrayed revolutionary concerns in the interest of maintaining class power, it is crucial and necessary for insurgent black intellectuals to have an ethics of struggle that informs our relationship to those black people who have not had access to ways of knowing shared in locations of privilege.

*GW:* Comment, if you will, on Freire's willingness to be critiqued, especially by feminist thinkers.

*bh:* In so much of Paulo's work there is a generous spirit, a quality of open-mindedness that I feel is often missing from intellectual and academic arenas in U.S. society, and feminist circles have not been an exception. Of course, Paulo seems to grow more open as he ages. I, too, feel myself more strongly committed to a practice of open-mindedness, a willingness to engage critique as I age, and I think the way we experience more profoundly the growing fascism in the world, even in so-called "liberal" circles, reminds us that our lives, our work, must be an example. In Freire's work in the last few years there are many responses to the critiques made of his writing. And there is that lovely critical exchange between him and Antonio Faundez in *Learning to Question* on the question of language, on Paulo's work in Guinea-Bissau. I learn from this

example, from seeing his willingness to struggle non-defensively in print, naming shortcomings of insight, changes in thought, new critical reflections.

*GW:* What was it like for you to interact personally with Paulo Freire?

*bh:* For me our meeting was incredible; it made me a devoted student and comrade of Paulo's for life. Let me tell you this story. Some years ago now, Paulo was invited to the University of Santa Cruz, where I was then a student and teacher. He came to do workshops with Third World students and faculty and to give a public lecture. I had not heard even a whisper that he was coming, though many folks knew how much his work meant to me. Then somehow I found out that he was coming only to be told that all the slots were filled for participants in the workshop. I protested. And in the ensuing dialogue, I was told that I had not been invited to the various meetings for fear that I would disrupt the discussion of more important issues by raising feminist critiques. Even though I was allowed to participate when someone dropped out at the last minute, my heart was heavy because already I felt that there had been this sexist attempt to control my voice, to control the encounter. So, of course, this created a war within myself because indeed I did want to interrogate Paulo Freire personally about the sexism in his work. And so with courtesy, I forged ahead at the meeting. Immediately individuals spoke against me raising these questions and devalued their importance, Paulo intervened to say that these questions were crucial and he addressed them. Truthfully, I loved him at this moment for exemplifying by his actions the principles of his work. So much would have changed for me had he tried to silence or belittle a feminist critique. And it was not enough for me that he owned his "sexism," I want to know why he had not seen

that this aspect of earlier work be changed, be responded to in writing by him. And he spoke then about making more of a public effort to speak and write on these issues—this has been evident in his later work.

*GW:* Were you more affected by his presence than his work?

*bh:* Another great teacher of mine (even though we have not met) is the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. And he says in *The Raft Is Not the Shore* that “great humans bring with them something like a hallowed atmosphere, and when we seek them out, then we feel peace, we feel love, we feel courage.” His words appropriately define what it was like for me to be in the presence of Paulo. I spend hours alone with him, talking, listening to music, eating ice cream at my favorite cafe. Seriously, Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that a certain milieu is born at the same time as a great teacher. And he says:

When you [the teacher] come and stay one hour with us, you bring that milieu. . . . It is as though you bring a candle into the room. The candle is there; there is a kind of light-zone you bring in. When a sage is there and you sit near him, you feel light, you feel peace.

The lesson I learned from witnessing Paulo embody the practice he describes in theory was profound. It entered me in a way that writing can never touch one and it gave me courage. It has not been easy for me to do the work I do and reside in the academy (lately I think it has become almost impossible) but one is inspired to persevere by the witness of others. Freire’s presence inspired me. And it was not that I did not see sexist behavior on his part, only that these contradictions are embraced as part of the learning process, part of what one struggles to change—and that struggle is often protracted.

*GW:* Have you anything more to say about Freire’s response to feminist critique?

*bh:* I think it important and significant that despite feminist critiques of his work, which are often harsh, Paulo recognizes that he must play a role in feminist movements. This he declares in *Learning to Question*:

If the women are critical, they have to accept our contribution as men, as well as the workers have to accept our contribution as intellectuals, because it is a duty and right that I have to participate in the transformation of society. Then, if the women must have the main responsibility in their struggle they have to know that their struggle also belongs to us, that is, to those men who don’t accept the machista position in the world. The same is true of racism. As an apparent white man, because I always say that I am not quite sure of my whiteness, the question is to know if I am really against racism in a radical way. If I am, then I have a duty and a right to fight with black people against racism.

*GW:* Does Freire continue to influence your work? There is not the constant mention of him in your latest work as was the case with the first books.

*bh:* Though I may not quote Freire as much, he still teaches me. When I read *Learning to Question*, just at a time when I had begun to engage in critical reflections on black people and exile, there was so much there about the experience of exile that helped me. And I was thrilled with the book. It had a quality of that dialogue that is a true gesture of love that Paulo speaks about in other work. So it was from reading this book that I decided that it would be useful to do a dialogical work with the philosopher Cornel West. We have what Paulo calls “a talking book,”

*Breaking Bread.* Of course my great wish is to do such a book with Paulo. And then for some time I have been working on essays on death and dying, particularly African American ways of dying. Then just quite serendipitously I was searching for an epigraph for this work, and came across these lovely passages from Paulo that echo so intimately my own worldview that it was as though, to use an old southern phrase, “My tongue was in my friend’s mouth.” He writes:

I like to live, to live my life intensely. I am the type of person who loves his life passionately. Of course, someday, I will die, but I have the impression that when I die, I will die intensely as well. I will die experimenting with myself intensely. For this reason I am going to die with an immense longing for life, since this is the way I have been living.

*GW:* Yes! I can hear you saying those very words. Any last comments?

*bh:* Only that words seem to be not good enough to evoke all that I have learned from Paulo. Our meeting had that quality of sweetness that lingers, that lasts for a lifetime; even if you never speak to the person again, see their face, you can always return in your heart to that moment when you were together to be renewed—that is a profound solidarity.