

bell hooks: The teacher, the feminist pedagogue, the film critic, the activist and most of all, the black feminist

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It has been nearly 30 years since bell hooks published her formidable collection of essays entitled *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (henceforth *Talking Back*). I have always respected and admired bell hooks as a radical teacher – books such as *Teaching Community* (2003) and *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (2010) have inspired me as an educator. However, this earlier book penned by her is vastly different than these in that it reveals much more than bell hooks “the educator” – *Talking Back* portrays bell hooks the student, the lover, the daughter, the (controversial) teacher, the feminist pedagogue, the film critic, the activist and most of all, the black feminist. In this book, she describes a variety of deeply personal experiences in “talking back” and reveals how difficult had been to do so, given her history and how she is seen as an emerging black, women activist during the 1980s. I find this mix of personal and professional experiences to be extremely intimate and therefore very influential. This book helps to legitimise how being personal can affect broader political and social issues.

The book consists of a collection of 25 essays on a wide range of compelling and notable topics of the time (1989). These include: feminist theory, racism, feminist scholarship, feminist pedagogy, intimate relationship violence, white supremacy, black homophobia, black feminism and even feminism and militarism. While this may seem like a haphazard array of topics – and they are – she weaves them together nicely by exposing and detailing her own

personal experiences, stories and anecdotes throughout. These autobiographical sketches ground her theoretical work as it unfolds over 184 pages. In addition to being politically provoked as a reader, you also get to know the woman who speaks from the pseudonym “bell hooks”. You get to know Gloria Watkins and the origins of her story.

To situate the perspective that I bring to this piece, it is important to reveal that I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class, non-immigrant, cis gender doctoral student from Canada. I became a social worker 15 years ago and currently teach and research social work practice. I cannot begin to comprehend bell hooks’ difficult path – this includes the racism, classism and sexism she experienced growing up and becoming a black academic in a white-male-dominated society and academy. I have not had to overcome the dual odds of facing both race and gender discrimination as a (burgeoning) academic. However, as a feminist in the academy, I continue to struggle to find my voice and place as an academic and author. I experienced moments of relatability while reading this book – many of these moments came from her discussions of toxic masculinity, functioning as a woman in university and speaking out (or “talking back”) as a woman. While reading and reviewing this book, I realised that many of the issues she discusses are strikingly familiar and relevant, even now.

I am writing this review in a troubling time. It’s 2018, and Western societies are (still)

grappling with issues of racism, sexism and classism. Here in Canada, we are in the midst of the #metoo movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has exposed the “cultural genocide” of Indigenous Peoples and the #blacklivesmatter movement is prominent. There is also an increasingly growing divide between social classes, political ideologies, religious beliefs and culture – extreme polarisation between views and communities is rampant. And I can’t help but speak to distinctive political and economic movements bubbling over: insular, nationalistic, misogynist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic and – dare I say it – fascist-like attitudes are sweeping the West.

It is from under this dark cloud of current events that I re-read bell hooks’ *Talking Back*. She stresses throughout her book that talking back and speaking your truth (especially as women and women of colour) is an important gesture of activism and an affirmation of struggle. She writes, “for us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power, it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (hooks, 1989, p. 8). She suggests that speaking out is a “courageous act” because it represents a threat to those in power – most suggestively, white men in power.

This act of courage (speaking out against and challenging of dominant forces) is needed now more than ever, especially in social work, which is one of the reasons I believe this book stands the test of time and why it continues to influence me. Given our current events, many feminist social workers fear that “our work and any progress we have made towards social justice, and the participatory democracy it requires, are more than ever endangered” (Goodkind & Ballentine, 2017, p. 425). In an effort to review this classic book, I will emphasize a few key messages that stood out on the topic of “talking back” that I feel are essential and relevant for women social workers to consider in today’s times, including women who teach and study inside social work classrooms.

Familial and early influences of patriarchy

As a child growing up in rural Kentucky, bell hooks experienced relentless punishment for speaking out or “talking back”. These “endless” punishments were intended to silence her – the girl child. She writes, “had I been a boy, they might have encouraged me to speak believing that I might someday be called to preach” (p. 6). These punishments were intended to suppress her so that “the right speech of womanhood” (i.e., saying nothing) could emerge (hooks, 1989). Her family called her “crazy girl” and she feared her own possible “madness” given the messages she received about questioning authority and bringing up issues that were not deemed appropriate. And yet, she would not stop – thinking, talking and writing are a part of her being, despite her family’s attempts to push her into silence. She felt empowered by “talking back” and using “defiant” speech as a young woman – this would make it possible for her to emerge as an independent thinker and writer later in life (hooks, 1989).

Throughout this book, bell hooks speaks about how sexism “directly shapes and determines relations of power in women’s private lives, in familiar social spaces, in the most intimate context – home – and in that most intimate sphere of relations – family” (hooks, 1989, p. 21). Growing up in male-dominated household, she experienced this firsthand – she writes that coercive adult male authority is more likely to cause long-term pain than racist oppression or class exploitation (hooks, 1989). It was within her family life that she witnessed powerful parent-based / male-based domination alongside connection and care and therefore learned to accept it. It became clear to her that experiencing oppression in the home made one feel all the more “powerless when encountering dominating forces outside the home” (hooks, 1989, p. 21). She writes, “if we are unable to resist and end domination in relations where there is care, it seems totally unimaginable that we can resist and end it

in other institutionalized relations of power” such as dominance by employers, strangers and partners who systemically humiliate and degrade women (hooks, 1989, p. 22). She argues, therefore, that resisting patriarchal domination should be of primary concern precisely because it insists on the eradication of oppression in the family context, which can then be translated into resistance in other types of relationships. It specifically addresses the person (the personal) in transforming the nature of relationships so that “we might be better able to act in a revolutionary manner, challenging and resisting domination, transforming the world outside the self” (hooks, 1989, p. 22).

This is especially important for women in social work to pay attention to, as we work with families and communities that have been torn apart by misogynist attitudes and gender-based violence. Women in social work must continue to recognise the influence that patriarchy still has on women and girls worldwide – feminist perspectives can help us reclaim the social justice focus of social work while we “support and care for those who are ever more marginalized under the new regime” (Goodkind & Ballentine, 2017, p. 426). Her story spoke to me about how important it is to continue to advocate and raise critical consciousness in all women, young or old, despite the fear that may be instilled in them to remain silent when faced with domination and oppression. As Lorde (1984) writes, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own” (pp. 132–133). Even though we may not completely understand each other’s experiences and stories, we must honour and respect them and create a society that values listening, collaboration, diversity and resistance.

Linking the personal to ongoing resistance

Raising critical consciousness is important, but bell hooks also argues that naming and uncovering pain is not enough in creating

systemic and long-term change for women’s rights. She argues that, as women, we must link our personal pain to strategies for resistance and transformation. The feminist movement has enabled women to become more aware of the impact of sexual domination and sexist oppression in women’s lives, but this awareness has “not led masses of women to commit themselves to feminist struggle, precisely because it is not fully linked to education for critical consciousness, to collective resistance” (hooks, 1989, p. 33). She argues we need to create adequate models for radical change in everyday life that would have meaning and significance to masses of women, so we don’t revert back to old patterns (such as the narrative that suggests we are responsible for male abuse and domination) (hooks, 1989).

This is relevant to current social work practice and education because we have a responsibility to link individual challenges to broader structures and commit to social justice work that addresses root causes of pain. The resistance to domination need not stop with awareness. The #metoo movement, for example, is one way to raise awareness and promote togetherness; however, we must work to advocate for continued justice and equal rights for women survivors and their allies in addition to addressing personal turmoil and trauma. The feminist framework needs to continue to resist domination on a larger scale.

Feminism in the university – teaching

When bell hooks teaches, she encourages her students to speak out, especially when they are afraid. She believes that students must practise using their voices; silence is a condition of oppression (hooks, 1989). Even if students do not express spontaneous thoughts and questions in the classroom, she instructs everyone to read passages and papers aloud so that everyone’s voice is heard and everyone makes a worthwhile contribution (hooks, 1989). Not only is it important for students to overcome their fear

and learn to speak as individual subjects, but they must come to understand how to speak responsibly and collectively.

She admits that this style of teaching is “very controversial” because she encourages student’s “coming to voice” in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk, rather than one that is “safe” and nurturing (hooks, 1989, p. 53). She wants to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel “empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion” and one that makes the world “more real than less real” (hooks, 1989, pp. 51–53). Discussions in the real world are not always pleasant or safe and we need to be equipped to think about social issues in reactionary and progressive ways through critical engagement. This, as well, is especially valid for social work practice and education as we must learn to operate as supporters to those who are living within the confines of oppression, exploitation and domination and we must accompany social work students to be confident in standing up for and with the marginalised.

Furthermore, privileged social work students may be unwilling or unable to recognise how their own minds have been “colonised” and “how they are learning to be oppressors, how to dominate, or at least how to passively accept the domination of others” (hooks, 1989, p. 102). Privileged students in social work must also learn to think not only about what they are reading in their textbooks and hearing from their clients and peers, but to think critically about the world they live in and their influence – that they engage in ongoing critical self-reflection (hooks, 1989). Ms hooks is committed to transforming lives in a university setting and believes that in the classroom we can do meaningful, radical political work as educators if we can engage in difficult self-work with students. Critical reflection on how social workers are complicit in marginalising clients and how we can (unknowingly) reproduce oppressive relations must remain a priority in social work education.

Feminism in the university – speaking

When Ms. hooks speaks or is invited to speak at events or conferences, she is often met with resistance by the “white” academy. She often weaves the personal with theoretical perspectives (as she does so well in this book) as a way to engage others so that they do not feel isolated or alienated – one’s story provides a “meaningful example, a way for folks to identify and connect” (hooks, 1989, p. 77). She wants her message to be as accessible as possible for all types of people – if she does not speak in a manner that is largely understood by the masses, there is little chance for dialogue (hooks, 1989). Yet, this is frequently resisted, questioned and received as a sign of intellectual “weakness” and she is told she appears unprepared and unprofessional (hooks, 1989). She has to then explain to her academic colleagues her allegiance to a revolutionary, community-based stance. She suggests it is “disturbing that intellectual radicals who speak about transforming society, ending the domination of race, sex, class, cannot break with behaviour patterns that reinforce and perpetuate domination” (hooks, 1989, p. 77).

She dismisses the idea that the “academic world” should be separate from the “everyday world where we adjust our language and behaviour to meet diverse needs” (hooks, 1989, p. 77). She states, “the academic setting is separate only when we work to make it so” (hooks, 1989, p. 78). She believes that, as we study and teach in university settings, we must work to maintain awareness of differences and nurture relationships with communities outside the academy, those who transform and enrich our educational experiences. She writes that “education as the practice of freedom becomes not a force with fragments and separates, but one that brings us closer, expanding our definitions of home and community” (hooks, 1989, p. 83). This is also particularly important to social work practice, scholarship and education. As social work academics and feminists, we must be

encouraged to practise in a manner that is seen as just, inclusive and in solidarity with community – especially during these bleak times.

Conclusion

I was struck by Ms. hooks' admission that she had not completely let go of the fear of saying the wrong thing, of being punished, even as an adult. She admits that one of the many reasons she chose to write using the pseudonym "bell hooks", her great-grandmother's name, was to "challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence" (p. 9). In the character, bell hooks, she invented an ally and a woman's voice she was not afraid to regularly use because she was too afraid to use her own. Today, women are being silenced and are afraid to speak out for fear of retaliation, whether that be anger,

judgement or disbelief in speaking their truth. Regardless of how we come to name and identify ourselves, bell hooks reminds us we must collectively continue to work to eradicate sexism, racism and class division through our united voices. To make a radical impact, resilience and activism is required of us at home, at university, in our relationships, in community and in our workplaces. When it comes to forces of domination, exploitation and oppression, women in social work have a responsibility to not mince words. We must talk back.

References

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