

Now Is the Time to Transgress

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

“More than ever before in the recent history of this nation,” bell hooks wrote in 1994, “educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge.”

Now, more than 25 years later, as we prepare to return to school—in whatever form school manifests this fall—her words are more urgent than ever.

Black Lives Matter and Education

Over the past few years, we have had the privilege to witness the growth of a civil rights movement—Black Lives Matter. Over the past few months, this movement has finally garnered mainstream support. Educators and institutions are releasing statements that outline how they will change in the face of—under the pressure from—this new movement. I am skeptical but hopeful.

The most important thing I and my fellow white higher ed workers can do is keep bell hooks’ words in the forefront of our mission: Confront our biases, especially how those biases have shaped teaching practices. Create new ways of knowing. Create new ways of learning. But we can’t do any of those things on our own. We must follow the lead of those who know what needs changing. Hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* is a fine place to start.

Confront Biases

Women in Higher Education is a newsletter for women higher ed workers. And if you are a white woman working in higher ed like me, then we have a lot of work to do. In Chapter 7 of *Teaching to Transgress*, “Holding My Sister’s Hand,” hooks tackles the long history of betrayal of Black women by white women. Starting with American slavery and going through Jim Crow segregation, hooks wraps up her clear-eyed historical recounting with these words:

White women often failed to acknowledge that intimacy and care can coexist with domination. It has been difficult for white women who perceive black women servants to be ‘like one of the family’ to understand that the servant might have a completely different understanding of their relationship.

Hooks is making a point about how everything has to do with power: “The servant may be ever mindful that no degree of affection or care altered the differences in status—or the reality that white women exercised power, whether benevolently or tyrannically.” As hooks explains, this deep history shapes any contemporary relationship—professional, personal and political—between Black and white women.

So, what can white women do? Isn’t it enough to be nice? No, of course not. But there’s another mistake many white women make when educating themselves about white supremacy and racism—they re-create the servant relationship with Black women, expecting Black women to do the work. Hooks writes, “It is usually white women who are seeking to receive something from black women, even if that something is knowledge about racism.”

White women must do the labor of educating ourselves. We must go to the bookstore and buy the books and *read* them. We must start our own book clubs and discuss the books. The work is ours. And before we can do any of that work, we must start from the presumption that we have work to do. After all, we live in a white supremacist society, and we therefore must fight against racist thoughts and actions every single day. That is our job.

What does this mean, practically? Don’t dump diversity and inclusion work on women of color in your department or division. Don’t expect women of color to educate white higher ed workers about racism. They’re not your teachers. They shouldn’t have to pull extra weight when it comes to white supremacy, especially when the burden of white supremacy belongs to white people.

These are our biases to confront.

New Ways of Knowing and Learning

Hooks writes, “I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning.” And yet, she later writes about “a grave sense of disease among professors ... when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge.” It was a rare professor, in her experience, who was interested in teaching this engaged, human way. “More than anything they [professors] seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom,” hooks writes. My own experience of nearly 20 years in higher ed confirms her observations.

The problem is that a pedagogy of domination reinforces white supremacy. This conclusion should be obvious—but to many professors who believe themselves to be liberal or even progressive, such words would come as a shock. Insisting that all of their students conform to a white, middle-class norm of “student” is racist teaching. These teachers reject the idea of trigger warnings or that critical race studies should be embedded in all teaching, not relegated to an elective. These changes, after all, interfere with how they rule their kingdoms.

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co-directorship, and both staff directors with whom she has worked have been African American men. “We are a team and don’t make any decisions without each other,” she says.

Her campus activism turned out to be good training for getting involved in her community as well. With her sister, Harvey started the Des Moines chapter of SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice). “That organization is important to me,” she says, “not because it’s perfect but because it’s conceptualized as an attempt to get more white people off the sidelines and into the active struggle against white supremacy.” This often means supporting youth of color; they are also currently working to get anti-racist pedagogy onto Iowa’s teacher training.

On Parenthood and Productivity

If you wonder how Harvey can seem to do it all, she explains, “As a parent and an academic, I really don’t know how women who have young children do that, *and* succeed in academe, if they don’t have a completely kick-ass partner.” Early in their children’s lives, Harvey’s partner got the kids to school and made sure grocery shopping was done. Harvey is aware of how different situations contribute to success: “I look at colleagues who are expected to do both campus work *and* all the family stuff and I wonder, how do people do it?”

Parenthood has given her perspective about higher education. The academic life, with its esoteric debates and political bickering, she says, “is potentially irrelevant if the entire world is burning down. I don’t know if my kids are going to have water in 20 years!” She would like to see academics and institutions play a greater role in their communities’ collective reckoning—on race, the environment and justice issues more broadly. She understands that many scholars are tired and maxed out, and she doesn’t want them to feel guilty. Instead, everyone should focus on doing whatever they can on issues that matter to people’s actual lives: “If we’re not thinking this way as academics, we’re participating in the failure to point out that the emperor has no clothes,” she says. “We have to help change this world right where we are.”

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Hooks describes her experiences co-leading seminars for her colleagues at Oberlin College OH back when she was an untenured professor. These seminars were to teach her colleagues about transformative pedagogy. She writes, “All too often we found a will to include those considered ‘marginal’ without a willingness to accord their work the same respect and consideration given to other work.” She continues, “This kind of tokenism is not multicultural transformation.” Her point is that exposure to nonwhite curricula is not good enough. Studying of white supremacy, interrogating biases and “teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex

and class” are the changes we need in order to transform higher education.

Women of color (and it has been mostly *women* of color) have been doing work on diversity task forces and committees for years—and no one has been listening, until now. Their invisible work is slowly becoming visible, as institutions are realizing that their support of white supremacist values is a really bad look and practice. Institutions are scrambling, and many are slapping on band-aids.

We all have an opportunity to do more than patch over a deeper problem. We have the chance to confront our own biases—and we do have them. We all do. We have the chance to change our departments, our divisions, even if only a little. We can speak with our friends and our colleagues. If you are a teacher, you can rethink the way you teach, and learn from those who have created resources (just do an internet search for “Black Lives Matter Syllabus” for a start). Read books that make you uncomfortable and embrace that discomfort.

And most importantly, recognize that you will never, ever feel comfortable again. That’s what it means to be anti-racist in a racist society. And that’s a good thing. 

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“Their true value is in making access to marginalized archives and unique collections widely available,” she adds. “I think that is transformative.” 

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