

IN MEMORIAM BELL HOOKS (GLORIA WATKINS) (1952-2021)

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Introduction: Tal Dor pays tribute to bell hooks a couple of days following the announcement of her demise. The journal was already at the stage of final production which had to be delayed to include this paper as a tribute to the great African-American activist, writer, poet, luminary and pedagogue. It is also fitting for a special issue on Freire, who was a key source of inspiration to hooks, who desired to engage in a 'talking book' with him which, alas, never came to pass. Tal Dor juxtaposes hooks' and her own settler colonial worlds in this tribute which takes the form of an open letter.

KEYWORDS: transformation, love, life, death, dialogue

Dearest bell hooks,

It is December 16th 2021. I don't know how to start writing to you. I just finished off a paper for the celebration of the centenary of Paulo Freire, in which I conversed with you, of course (*see Dor, this issue – editors*). I did not imagine I would have to mourn your death so shortly after. A dear

friend of mine, who knows how your work has transformed my life and how I have been conversing with you for the last 20 years, called to give me the very sad news.

bell hooks just died, she said. The words resonated on the phone. I felt profound sadness scrolling up my body.

How can I speak about the sweetness of my encounter with you and your work while feeling so much loss?

I choose to write you. I cannot think of another way to enter this conversation. I am inspired by your playful dialogue with yourself when you describe the way in which Paulo Freire influenced your life and work:

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 (hooks, 1994: 45).

In my work on processes of liberation from settler colonial Zionist thought, you have been central in showing me the way to learn to change, to transform my own consciousness and seek genuine solidarity to end Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestine - “the power to transform,” you named it (hooks, 1984).

Reading your book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, thinking Black* (hooks, 1989), I think of my childhood trajectory within the Israeli settler colonial space. I want to share with you the pain I experienced as a child. But not as a reproduction of a culture of domination which is narcissistic, as you say, but rather as a praxis in the struggle to end domination.

When I was young, my family doubted that I would finish high school and I actually barely did. Reading for me was a very difficult task. Today, as I write these lines, I know

that my liberation processes from colonial consciousness, are processes through which I did not only develop political and intellectual feminist counter-hegemonic consciousness; I also acted within tasks that sought liberation from the hegemonic labeling of a dyslectic child.

Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (hooks, 2003: 43).

I know you differentiate between the personal quest for freedom and the collective liberation struggle. In your piece “Love as the Practice of Freedom” you speak about the importance of feeling self-interest in change in order to critically examine our “blind spots” (hooks, 1994 [2006]: 244). You speak about ethics of love as an important part in one’s self-longing for change. Love ethics you say, is the ability to acknowledge blind spots and thus develop the oppositional gaze at domination.

The love I got from my family as a child empowered me to carry on, yet the warmth and strength I got from your writings as an adult is what transformed my life and allowed me not only to transgress with regard to forces of domination but also to disregard borders and reach to unreachable spaces – on many levels.

I would like to share with you that my political *transFormation* influenced my sense of entitlement and encouraged me to read. Yet, reading you is what sparked my passion and feminist willfulness to learn and what motivates me to carry on in the struggle, in creating dialogue even when it is hard, and at times painful: “the pain of loneliness, the pain of loss, the pain of isolation, the pain of exile - spiritual and physical. Even before the words we remember the pain. As comrades in struggle

writing about the effort to end racial domination in South Africa put it in the Freedom Charter: « Our strange struggle of memory against forgetting »”(hooks, 1989: 4).

This letter is my struggle to remember and recognition of how your work has deeply touched my life and transformed my consciousness - not only as an intellectual, a sociologist and a critical pedagogue but also as a radical feminist anti-colonial activist.

bell, I have tremendously learned from you, but I am not sure words can express the profoundness of this process. I go back to your dialogue with yourself in *Teaching to transgress* and look for words:

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. (hooks, 2003: 58)

You have given me language, not only to me but also to many of us struggling to find creative ways to end colonial domination. You have provided this language to any of us who seek *transFormation* towards radical thought and praxis as a means to build a sense of entitlement to act from a marginal and excluded position (hooks, 1994). You showed us the way towards formative processes, through willful learning and a constant quest for wellbeing (hooks, 2003: 46). Liberation, you taught us, is the way to engage in self-formation when entering into the quest for radical thought. You taught us acceptance, but not as a passive stance rather as radical action to change the world.

You taught us Israelis and Palestinians, struggling to end Zionist domination, to name the multiple racial,

sexist, class oppressions and understand our position within it and thus our responsibility. You taught us to seek for the **truth** and reveal that which is under the surface (2010b), to unveil the hegemonic lies. You taught us to develop that oppositional gaze at reality that enables us to reframe the way in which we live reality and then carry out actions of critical thinking as empowered agents within it.

You have given us language, you taught us that we can develop an enlightened consciousness (hooks, 2003) as the possibility to start seeing the *truth*. You taught us that in order to change the world we have to create new language, that of feminist resistance that which will allow us a more complex gaze at the world.

You taught us to love as a task of resistance to violence - refusal to embody the violence. You invited us to think of liberation processes as a willful act of love, an act that one chooses to take. The choice derives from the will to li(o)ve in community. Being part of a community permits collective and joint *transForming*.

We learned from you the importance of praxis, of question-asking pedagogy. This strives to discover the: Who, What, When, Where, and How of reality (*see Giroux, this volume, editors*). And then know how to use the knowledge we have acquired. Knowing, according to you, helps prioritize and “determine what matters most” (hooks, 2010a: 9).

I learned from you that critical thinking is praxis, as it is a way of life and a way of approaching the world, rather than a singular action. That Knowledge is constructed through dialogue. Being in constant doubt, which develops the ability to think dialectically.

So, I choose to remember, I choose to continue the dialogue with you, I choose to love: “Awakening to love can

happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” (hooks, 2001: 87). I choose to embrace the unknown:

I know no one who has embraced a love ethic whose life has not become joyous and more fulfilling (hooks, 2001: 88).

Thank you bell hooks, for fulfilling my life, for teaching us about struggle, for taking part in the journey. For radicalizing the encounters that have changed my life.

Rest in power, we miss you already!

Tal Dor
Paris, December 2021

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