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ART 591 - Art and Cultural Activism

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Transgressing the Codes:

the bell hooks toolkit

On a certain level, all of our behavior is “coded”. Experience, memory, language, dominant paradigms, mass media, consumerism, and the culture at large all serve as building blocks for individual identity. If an individual is raised seeing their own race/gender/class represented by pervasive negative stereotypes, it’s going to be difficult to escape internalization of this negative bias in the construction of their own identity, and by extension their behavior. Even those who are astute enough to be aware of the inaccuracies of stereotypes, to attempt the “construction of an identity in resistance” (hooks, 46), are affected on some deep level. It becomes a self-fulfilling cycle.

The first step in breaking the codes is recognizing and deciphering them. If I’m not aware of the external influences that affect who I am, what I think, and how I act, I won’t be able to change these responses either. In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks paints a picture of the stagnant world of the academic institution ruled by the traditional “banking system of education”--with emphasis placed on authority over equality, control over encouragement, power over interaction, regurgitation over critical thinking--that serves only to embed the codes deeper in our cultural psyche and support

the dominant white male paradigms both inside and outside the institution. She talks about her own experience with professors who “used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (5), an act which only perpetuates the power structure that keeps individuals from personal empowerment and self-actualization. In response, hooks gives us practical tools for unraveling the codes, student by student. She calls this tool set “liberatory pedagogy” or “teaching as the practice of freedom.” I believe, if this practice were put into widespread use, our culture as a whole might shatter the dominant codes and replace them with anti-hegemonistic standards which would encourage the development of every individual to their fullest potential.

The dominators have a vested interest in keeping the existing power structure in place. Acknowledging equal contributions by marginalized groups creates the challenge of playing on a level field, which could allow the possibility of their own inferiority being revealed. Over the centuries, the dominators have fixed the codes that help prevent this. Examples are everywhere: in film, television, and advertising; in pay scale and job distribution statistics; in the naming of natural monuments and rooted deep within the language. If African-Americans see themselves depicted in the media as mostly drug dealers, pimps, or servants, then they might not be aware of the other avenues open to them. This results in a “. . . relative lack of black power to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies.’ (West, 128)

Some of the deepest-seated biases are revealed in language and naming, and it is out of a desire to change these biases that the “politically correct” movement was born. While it may seem like a superficial solution, that changing the words we use only helps hide the underlying prejudices, I believe that over time the changes in language can produce changes in the biases. Hooks feels the

way that “language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body” (hooks, 167). If I can only talk about myself using the language of the oppressor, I’m going to be complicit in my own oppression.

The effects of language are subtle, but not without impact. Few women may consciously notice that natural monuments named after men use last names, whereas the ones named after women all use first names. Yet even unconsciously, the attitude which this embodies-- that women are in some way inferior and so not as deserving of the more distinctive representation by surname-- is encoded in every women’s construction of identity. This construction is clearly evidenced in the classroom, where intelligent women often silence their own opinions in favor of listening only to what the men have to offer.

The central tenets of hook’s praxis of “liberatory pedagogy” includes breaking down the traditional role of the teacher as supreme authority and students as mere sponges, and giving each and every student a recognition of the value of their own voice and the voices of the other students. Simple acts like changing the classroom furniture from an audience/stage configuration to a circle of equal individuals can be empowering. Creating a space in which all students can share experiences and learn to respect the validity of others experiences is the first step in breaking the codes of the dominant paradigm. Hooks writes:

“We are all subjects in history. We must return ourselves to a state of 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. By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination.” (139)

While the codes established by the white male hegemony may seem pervasive and difficult to subvert, they are not as strong as the coding produced by our own experiences. By encouraging her students to engage in both the sharing of their own experiences and also listening intently to others', hooks is helping each student to rewrite their own codes. Eventually, as her practice spreads, this act of autonomous individualism might just rewrite the cultural codes that keep marginalized peoples from contributing to the evolution of our society.

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Works Cited:

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

West, Cornel. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference." In *The Cornel West Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999. 119-139.