

**Paulo Freire and bell hooks: an encounter in the
United States**^{1 2 3 4}

Paulo Freire e bell hooks: um encontro nos Estados Unidos

Paulo Freire y bell hooks: un encuentro en los Estados Unidos

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Abstract

This article analyzes the reciprocal influences between Paulo Freire and bell hooks based on the examination of their biographies, works, and writings. Both of them had the opportunity to get to know each other, and several authors highlight the impact exerted by Freire's early works in the Americas, as well as the effect of his passage through the United States. Freire and hooks published in English, deepening the debate on the politics of education and the perception of inequalities of class, race, and sex. Relying on bibliographic sources and critical literature, the article identifies points of convergence between the popular educator and the feminist militant, suggesting that they have positioned themselves at the center of global capitalism and built an insurgent theory, thus challenging hegemonic positions.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, bell hooks, United States, Education, Freedom

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Resumo

O texto analisa as influências recíprocas entre Paulo Freire e bell hooks a partir do exame de suas biografias, seus trabalhos e escritos. Ele e ela tiveram a oportunidade de se conhecer, e vários autores destacam o impacto exercido pelas primeiras obras de Paulo nas Américas, bem como o efeito de sua passagem pelos Estados Unidos. Freire e hooks publicaram em inglês, tendo aprofundado o debate sobre a politicidade da educação e a percepção das desigualdades de classe, raça e sexo. Contando com fontes bibliográficas e fortuna crítica, o artigo identifica pontos de convergência entre o educador popular e a militante feminista, sugere que se posicionaram no centro do capitalismo global e construíram uma teoria insurgente, desafiando as posições hegemônicas.

Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Estados Unidos, Educação, liberdade

Resumen

El texto analiza las influencias recíprocas entre Paulo Freire y bell hooks a partir del examen de sus biografías, sus obras y escritos. Él y ella tuvieron la oportunidad de conocerse, y varios autores destacan el impacto de las primeras obras de Paulo en América, así como el efecto de su paso por Estados Unidos. Freire y hooks publicaron en inglés, habiendo profundizado el debate sobre las políticas de educación y la percepción de las desigualdades de clase, raza y género. Apoyándose en fuentes bibliográficas y fortuna crítica, el artículo identifica puntos de convergencia entre la educadora popular y la activista feminista, sugiriendo que se posicionaron en el centro del capitalismo global y construyeron una teoría insurgente, desafiando las posiciones hegemónicas.

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Paulo Régus Neves Freire

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was born on the outskirts of Recife and lived there in his childhood. Son of a father captain of the State Police of Pernambuco and a mother who dedicated herself to domestic work, he was raised with his sister and two brothers. All of them carried out their studies discontinuously, due to the economic difficulties faced by the family with the early death of their father and the crisis of 1929. Paulo Freire attended the elementary school in a public institution and middles and high school as a scholarship holder at the Colégio Oswaldo Cruz of Recife, where he worked as a bedel, teacher's assistant, and Portuguese teacher to finance his studies and complement the household income. He joined the public university in 1943 and continued teaching Portuguese. As a second-year Law student, he married Elza Maia Costa de Oliveira, with whom he had three daughters and two sons.

He graduated in 1947 at the Law School of Recife, but did not pursue a career as a lawyer. He established himself in the area of Education since 1947, when he took a position in the newly created Social Service of Industry (SESI), in the Division of Education and Culture, being invited by Rangel Moreira, his high school friend. He remained at this position until 1957 and approached the working classes with little to no schooling nor professional qualifications. He came into contact with the condition of social exclusion experienced by the vast majority of the young and adult population of Recife and its region (Freire, 2013).

In the 1950s, he interacted with actors and institutions in the field of culture and education: the University of Recife, under the management of João Alfredo da Costa Lima, today the Federal University of Pernambuco; the Regional Center for Educational Research, directed by Gilberto Freyre; the Recife Modern Art Society, with Hélio Feijó; the Collective Atelier, with Abelardo da Hora and Francisco Brennand; the Pernambuco Student Theater, founded by Ariano Suassuna and Hermilo Borba Filho; the City Hall and the Municipal Department of Education of Recife, in the government of Miguel Arraes, among others (Mazza, 2022).

In the interweaving of these institutions, processes, and actors, he took part in the Popular Culture Movement (MCP) of Recife and, at the beginning of the 1960s, he was invited to extend the work experiences with adult education that he had been carrying out with SESI, the Extension and Culture Service (SEC) of the University, the City Hall, and other popular culture movements, such as the National Union of Students (UNE) and the Popular Culture Centers (CPC) to other states—Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte.

In the early 1960s, the programs for adult education and literacy were expanded by the: “De pé no chão também se aprende a ler” Campaign, CPC, Peasant Leagues, MCP, SEC, and other mobilized processes, paradoxically, by progressive party militancy, by Catholic youth, and by recommendations and funding for the continent set in the *Charter of Punta del Este*⁵. Angicos’ experience was part of these actions and, according to Calazans Fernandes and Antonia Terra

⁵ The Charter was agreed at the VIII Meeting of Consultation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Organization of American States (OAS) held in Punta del Este, Uruguay (January 22-31, 1962), with the objective of discussing the impact of the Cuban Revolution on hemispheric affairs. The USA proposed an economic aid program from its government to Latin America, called the Alliance for Progress, in exchange for adherence to the trade embargo and the adoption of measures to isolate the socialist regime of Cuba (Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2022).

(1994), was understood by the general on duty as a process of “fattening rattlesnakes in these hinterlands” (p. 18).

In 1964, Paulo Freire was in Brasília, invited by the Chief Minister of the Civil House, Darcy Ribeiro, and the Minister of Education, Paulo de Tarso Santos, from the government of João Goulart (1961-1964), coordinating the National Literacy Program, whose objective was to literate millions of illiterate adults scattered throughout the country, in a short time, by employing the Paulo Freire system. The *coup d'état* and institutional Act No. 1 of April 9, 1964 immediately hit the government, ministers, congressmen, work teams, governors, and citizens, seen as opponents of the authoritarian regime. The coup carried out and led by the Armed Forces had the support of part of the business community, society, and the government of the United States. Freire went into exile, passing through Bolivia and settling in Chile (1964-1968), the United States (1969), and Switzerland (1970-1980). Thus, it can be inferred that he was a northeastern, provincial, and peripheral man who was raising his profile on a regional, national, and international scale (Mazza, 2022).

As a Brazilian political exile (November 1964 to April 1969), living in Santiago, Freire worked at the Institute for Training and Research in Agrarian Reform (ICIRA), as an advisor to the Institute for Agricultural Development (INDAP) and to the Ministry of Education of Chile, and as a consultant to UNESCO. On these fronts, he was in contact with small farmers and groups of rural communities that were undergoing accelerated experiences of Agrarian Reform, subsidized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Chilean government (Torres, 2021, p. 41). In 1967, without mastering English, he made his first working visit to the United States to lecture in New York, based on the ideas and notes he had been working on in the book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The American educator Carmen Hunter accompanied him during his passage through the country and made the simultaneous translation of his presentations. The lecture invitations continued and he held a series of lectures Sponsored by the OAS, in partnership with the University of Chile and the government of Chile (Haddad, 2019, p. 95).

By this time he had already made public a set of experiences systematized in the texts “*Conscientização e alfabetização: uma nova visão do processo*” (1963), “*Educação e atualidade brasileira*” (1959), “*Educação como prática da liberdade*” (1965), and “*Extensão ou comunicação?*” (1969), which

mobilized, in Portuguese and Spanish, works developed in Brazil, Chile, and Latin America (Santos, 2021). He already participated in a supranational network of intellectuals, composed of Jacques Chonchol, in Chile; Orlando Fals Borda, in Colombia; Erich Fromm and Ivan Illich, in Mexico; Gustavo Gutiérrez, in Peru, among others (Donoso Romo, 2020).

This first invitation, along with an award received from UNESCO (Kirkendall, 2010), resulted in many others, through which Freire anticipated the criticism of banking education, which he was developing in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and, faced with the reception and suggestions received from the audience of American intellectuals, he became convinced that the book was finished and could be published and marketed. Sérgio Haddad (2019) tells us:

After the first trip to the United States, Freire began to receive frequent invitations from various American universities for meetings and lectures. More concretely, a letter arrived from Harvard proposing a two-year contract, starting in 1969 ... Paulo and Elza decided to negotiate (p. 98).

Paulo Freire was aware that the United States represented, at the time, the matrix of global imperialism, and this was a reason for a double thinking about the proposal (Freire & Guimarães, 2001, pp. 108-110). However, the political environment in Chile was unstable, the job offer at Harvard was attractive, and the family decided to leave Chile and go to the United States before the Socialist Party won the presidential elections, with Salvador Allende (1970-1973), who was deposed by a *coup d'état* led by the head of the Armed Forces, general Augusto Pinochet, aligned with American interests (Vasconcelos, 2020).

Between 1969 and 1970, part of the Freire family lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, experienced the cold of the apartment rented by the University at 371 Broad St, and Freire taught classes at the University of Harvard and advised the Center for the Study of Development and Social Change. There, the first edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was translated into English by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), as well as other titles: *Cultural action for freedom* (Foreword by João da Veiga Coutinho and translation by Loretta Slover); *Harvard Educational Review*, Center for the *Study of Development and Social Change* (Monograph Series No. 1), Cambridge, Mass, 1970; *Extension or communication?* (Foreword by Jacques Chonchol and translation by Louse Bigwood and Margaret Marshal, McGraw Hill, New York, 1973). Also published in London by Writers and Readers, 1976, along with *Education as the practice of freedom*. At the time, Freire and his books were forbidden to enter Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal

(Freire, 1992, p. 123). Many titles circulated first in English, then were translated into numerous languages by recognized and clandestine publishers, and later in Portuguese and Spanish (Gadotti, 1996, pp. 257-282).

Even considering the complex relationships surrounding economic, political, and cultural dynamics, in addition to their rebuttals in international geopolitical asymmetries, one should highlight the transnational symbolic gains that Freire's passage through the United States conferred on his trajectory. There are rare chances for a popular northeastern Brazilian educator dedicated to extension activities and adult education to raise visibility in the center of global imperialism and be read in the language that occupies a privileged position in the progress of science, technology, research, and international cultural environment (Ortiz, 2004). At Harvard, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world (which included eight former US presidents and about 150 Nobel Prize winners), he acted as Visiting Scholar, and this gave him the status of "*l'exercice légitime de l'activité intellectuelle*" and allowed him to accumulate "*acquis historiques*" in the "*lutte internationale pour la domination en matière culturelle et pour l'imposition du principe de domination dominant*" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 8).

Freire orbits in this field of production, and his works are reinterpreted from this structure of reception, promoting what Bourdieu calls gate-keepers. Therefore, publishers, translators, foreword authors, and readers attach their visions to the work, inscribe it in the context of reception and reconstruct the field of origin, the categories of perception, and the problems addressed (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 5). This short, but successful, passage of Freire by Harvard led Darcy Ribeiro (1996) to confess: "I was green with envy when I saw in a bookstore in New York a big pile of Paulo's books next to a tiny pile of my *Civilization process*" (p. 373).

From the point of view of the constitution of Freire's thought, we understand that the international circulation matured his ideas and themes, because the writings of the 1960s gravitated towards the exposition of our democratic inexperience, which confused education with "bachelorism, hollow and empty":

Thus, absurdly, theory is identified with verbalism. In fact, we need theory. A theory that implies an insertion in reality, in an analytical contact with things that exist, to prove them and live them fully. In this sense, to theorize is to contemplate. Not in the distorted sense that we give it, of opposition to reality. Of abstraction. Our education is not theoretical because it lacks this taste for proof, invention, and research. It is verbose. Wordy. (Freire, 2022, p. 123)

He demanded a theory of culture that fought against the errors and vices of the colonial past and a theory of education that included “the miserable, the illiterate workers, the poorest people of Brazil” and that drove away the “ideological ghost of communism, which the ruling classes agitated against any democratic government in Latin America” (Weffort, 2022, pp. 17-18). He wrote that in the Brazilian past three “Ps” were overused: “stick (*pan*) to punish, bread (*pão*) to eat, and cloth (*pano*) to dress”. Freire continues (2022):

Indeed, what has characterized our formation from the beginning has undoubtedly been exacerbated power ... the masochistic taste ... the submission that resulted, as a consequence, in adjustment, accommodation, and non-integration. ... Integration requires a maximum of reason and awareness. It is the characteristic behavior of flexibly democratic regimes. The problem of adjustment and accommodation is linked to mutism ... and our democratic inexperience. (p. 100)

He continued to seek references that would replace, in the oppressed people, old habits of passivity with new habits of participation and interference in collective deliberations and in the growth of popular momentum (Freire, 2022, pp. 117-118). He assessed that the structural conditions of our colonization were consolidated by the economic exploitation of the great latifundium, by slave labor, by arrogant violence, by predatory incursions to native peoples, and by the Almighty Lord who lengthened the caciquism in the harsh laws “of the owner of the lands and the people”. And he says: “There lay the cultural conditions in which the dispositions of caciquism, dependence, and protectionism by paternalistic and welfare solutions were born and developed in the Brazilian people” (pp. 91-94).

He points out that even the trade, industry, and cultural activities of our cities reinforce the anti-democratic vertical traditions stimulated since the arrival of the royal family in 1808, aiming to meet “the pleasures of life that the court boasted”. Thus, the birth of “schools, the press, the library, and high school” took place from top to bottom, which authorized the exclusive right to “gallop, dodge, or trot through the streets of cities to the military men, militiamen, and privileged men dressed and shod in European style” (Freire, 2022, pp. 104-106).

In this context, Paulo sought a pedagogy that “faced the discussion with the common people and their right to participate in power,” because the uprooted and oppressive education led to “the people witnessing astonished the most recent setbacks of the Brazilian process ...

but [it] is beginning to understand that the setbacks are being made because of the advances” (Freire, 2022, p. 109).

Freire’s political exile led him to subvert national borders, launching him into the transnational cosmopolitan environment, enabling the exposure of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to the *Black looks* of bell hooks and sensitizing him to the problems of oppression of indigenous peoples, black people, women, and migrants.

Gloria Jean Watkins

Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021) was born in Hopkinsville, a small segregated town in the state of Kentucky, southern United States. She grew up in a working-class family: her father was a janitor, and her mother was a maid in the homes of white families. She was raised with five other sisters and one brother. She studied in American public schools that practiced the system of racial segregation and experienced “education as a practice of freedom” with teachers involved with the reality of black communities. She was known as bell hooks, after her great-grandmother, indigenous woman Bell Blair Hooks. She made sure that her name is written in lowercase, so as not to flaunt excitement and draw attention to her actions and ideas. She remained single and did not have children, although she indicates that she built lasting relationships with partners (hooks, 2023, p. 15; 2021a, p. 27). She says that, according to the sexist thinking of the time, there were three careers for black girls: getting married, working as maids, or being teachers. She says:

Since elementary school I was destined to become a teacher. But the dream of becoming a writer has always been inside me. Since childhood, I believed that I would teach and write. The writing ... it was a matter of private longing and personal glory, while teaching was a service, a way of giving back to the community. For black people, teaching - educating - was fundamentally political, as it had roots in the anti-racist struggle. In fact, it was in schools ... attended only by blacks, that I had the experience of learning as a revolution.

Almost every teacher in the school ... were black women. Their commitment was to nurture our intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and workers in the cultural sector ... We learned early on that our devotion to study was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist all white strategies of racist colonization. Although they did not define or formulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers practiced a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance, deeply anti-colonial. (Hooks, 2019a, pp. 10-11)

At the end of basic education, she transitioned to integrated schools and began to live with predominantly white teachers and students.

Suddenly, knowledge was reduced to pure information ... Taken by bus to white schools, we soon learned that what was expected of us was obedience, not a burning desire to learn. The excessive eagerness to learn was easily understood as a threat to white authority ... we took classes with white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes ... Despite intensely negative experiences, I graduated from school still believing that education is empowering ... that it increases our ability to be free. (Hooks, 2019a, pp. 12-13)

She faced from childhood various adverse situations that awakened her to the condition of women, race, and social class.

Raised in a family where aggressive embarrassment and verbal humiliation coexisted with affection and care, I had a hard time embracing the term dysfunctional ... this strange mixture of affection and cruelty. ... On a normal day in my family of origin, I would receive loving attention, and the fact that I am a smart girl would be affirmed and stimulated. Then, hours later, someone would tell me that it was precisely because I thought I was so smart that I would possibly end up crazy and in a mental institution where no one would visit me. (2021a, p. 43)

She had to reinvent her ability to cope with humiliation, establish relationships of belonging with black women, and learn to love within patriarchal and racist culture. She proposes “conversion policies” from the nihilism present in society through actions that promote ruptures with the cycle of perpetuation of pain and violence, that put the ethics of love on the collective realm, and that teach the formation of educational communities that strengthen self-esteem and challenge the *status quo* (2021b). She points out that “where there is physical or psychic abuse, violence and lying, the loving practice has failed” (2021a, p. 17). She understands that love is much more than deep affection for someone, it is about the “willingness to do your best to promote your own growth ... or that of another person” (p. 41). She identifies the loss

of the sense of community that connects and brings people together, expands the mind, and creates liberating mutualities. She also denounces that schools and churches today encourage the materialistic ethics of making money as much as possible and spread competition, consumerism, individualism, and the desire to eliminate the competitor (2021b).

She received a scholarship and graduated in Languages and Literature at Stanford University (1973), as well as earned a Master of Arts degree in the same area from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1976). It was in higher education that hooks approached Women's Studies⁶ and learned about gender differences, sexism, and patriarchy as systems that have shaped female roles and identity, but says she has seen "little about the role assigned to black women in our culture" (2023, p. 10). She denounces that white feminists wanted their experiences to connect to shared notions of sorority: "and there I was ... audacious young black woman ... insisting that there were big differences determining the experiences of black and white women. My effort to understand these differences ... substantiated my writings" (2023, p. 10).

Her doctorate, held at the University of Santa Cruz, California, is on the work of Toni Morrison (1983), a black American writer, editor, and professor, and a pioneer in the problematization of the relationships between race, gender, and beauty.

When I started undergraduate school ... I became fascinated by the process of becoming an insurgent black intellectual. I was surprised and shocked to see classes in which teachers were not enthusiastic about the act of teaching, in which they did not seem to have the vaguest notion that education has to do with the practice of freedom. ... The vast majority of our teachers lacked basic communication skills. They were not self-actualized and often used the classroom to exercise control rituals whose essence was domination and the unjust exercise of power. In that environment, I learned a lot about the kind of teacher I didn't want to be. (hooks, 2019a, pp. 13-14)

His teaching career began in 1976, working with the teaching of English and Ethnic Studies, when she came into contact with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

⁶ "The field of Women's Studies emerged in the United States in the late 1960s with the proposal of studying feminism from interdisciplinary methods, placing the lives and experiences of women at the center of debates about cultural and social constructions of gender. Race, sexual orientation, and class were some of the issues debated in the classrooms of these disciplines, which today are more commonly referred to as Gender Studies" (hooks, 2023, p. 10).

To react to tension, boredom, and apathy ... as they took over the classes, I imagined ways in which the teaching and learning experience could be different. When I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, my first contact with critical pedagogy, I found in him a mentor, a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberating. (hooks, 2019a, p. 15)

She taught at various institutes of post-secondary education and, in the 1980s and 1990s, she taught and held various positions at the *University of Southern California, California, Yale University, City College of New York, and Berea College in Berea, Kentucky.*

Over time, she went on to teach, write, and publish about African American Studies, Black Women's Studies, and to build a theory about feminism, antiracism, antipatriarchalism, and anticolonialism, published in books such as: *And there we wept: Poems* (1978), *Ain't I a black woman: Women and feminism* (1981), *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (1984), *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black* (1989), among others.

Her work focuses on the intersectionality of race, sex, and gender as systems of oppression that perpetuate domination beyond social class conditions (hooks, 2019c). She develops a critical perspective of pedagogy, influenced by the readings she made of Paulo Freire, and says:

In graduate school, I realized what bored me in the classroom. The system of banking education (based on the assumption that the memorization of information and its subsequent regurgitation represent an acquisition of knowledge that can be deposited, saved, and used at a future date) did not interest me. (hooks, 2019a, p. 14)

Her texts inspired students and university professors who questioned the politics of domination, the impact of racism and sexism, and the imperialist and class exploitation in the United States.

bell hooks also left us questions about the orders of representation and the regimes of visibility that dynamize contemporary global politics. She began to observe and critically analyze everyday situations from which black identities could be recovered outside the monolithic block of Western culture. She narrates:

Friday night at a small town in the Midwest of the United States – I go with some artists and teachers to a pastry shop ... As we passed a group of white men ... we can hear them talking about us, saying that my classmates, who are all white, must be college progressives ... to be walking with a ‘creole’. Everyone ... act like they haven’t heard it ... As we enter ...they all burst into laughter and point to a row of giant chocolate breasts, entitled to nipples – huge edible tits. They find this idea delightful – without seeing any connection between this racialized image and the racism demonstrated in the entrance ... They don’t see this depiction of chocolate breasts as a misplaced sign of a nostalgia for a racist past in which black women’s bodies were commodities available to any white person who could pay their price. (hooks, 2019c, pp. 129-130)

She criticized the products and devices of the cultural industry (films, books, images, television programs, pop culture) that circulated in the atmosphere of planetary technical capitalism and inquired: Why are the bodies of black women represented with advanced formats, indicating an “anatomy worthy of more attention”? Why do perky butts perform “sexual iconographies”? Why has “the image of black women’s sexuality been turned into a synonym for wild animalistic lust?” (hooks, 2019c, pp. 138-143).

She makes explicit in her works the pain of time, the feeling of suffering, and suggests pieces of healing, pointing to levees that refrain white supremacy and design a platform that makes “*Black looks*” emerge (hooks, 2019c). These are agendas of interventions that position the hegemonic vision to other subaltern looks around cultural appropriations. “How are black men and their masculinities represented in Madonna’s films? Is she always able to destroy, erase, dominate, and consume the object of her desire? Does she “appropriate aspects of black culture and turn them into merchandise?” (hooks, 2019c, p. 21).

She also establishes connecting threads that can bring together the non-hegemonic: native indigenous people and black and African American people. She proposes the possibility of a culturally rooted solidarity that activates these groups so that they do not identify with white supremacist attitudes and do not accept victimization and powerlessness. She struggles to make black identities visible and positive by grappling with a world that is both terrifying and rich in the black culture of the American South, and wonders: Why “the idea of ‘primitive’ is embedded in people’s psyches ... shaping contemporary racist stereotypes, perpetuating racism?” Why does one “associate blackness with uncontrolled irrationality ... decay ... corruption ... illness and death?” (hooks, 2019c, p. 83).

By claiming the relationship between race, representation, and identity construction, she overcomes the trap of disputes between universalist, identity, and emergency policies and beckons to transformative actions, capable of finding ways to reinvent the world from other aesthetic, ethical, and political sensibilities.

She denounces that not even the presence of a black president in the White House, Barack Obama (2009-2017), changed the racialized representations of the American social formation, because “Michelle Obama was presented by the mass media as angry, emasculating, evil, all the hateful ways recurring to black and demoralized women” (hooks, 2019c, p. 28). She asks us: “why do representations of black women’s sexuality in the cultural marketplace always appear associated with someone who is selling a hot pussy?” (hooks, 2019c, p. 129).

Hence the importance of a teacher and a school that educate so that the negotiated images dethrone the overvaluation of whiteness, unlink the status of blackness as a marker of impotence and victimization, and promote “healing through awareness” (hooks, 2019c, pp. 62-63).

Thus, hooks (2021b) amplifies the status of education when she states:

Education at its best – that profound human transaction called teaching and learning – is not just about acquiring information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is related to empowerment, liberation, transcendence, renewing vitality. It concerns finding our existence and our place in the world (p. 89).

In this key, she understands that democratic teachers admit that learning is not confined to the classroom or institutionalized spaces – it occurs all the time and constitutes one of the most relevant processes in the lives of black, peripheral, and poor people, “because it is an experience that enriches life completely” (hooks, 2021b, p. 89). She suggests dialogue as a central place in democratic pedagogy:

Talking to share information and exchange ideas is the practice that, inside and outside the academic environment, states that learning can occur in varied durations ... and that knowledge can be shared in different speech registers. (hooks, 2021b, p. 91)

Thus, she participates in black feminist movements that promote social justice, understanding them as concrete actions that conspire against existing structures of domination and oppressive hierarchies.

hooks, as Freire, values theory and writes several times that she came to it because she felt hurt, in intense pain, and therefore wanted to understand what was happening around her and within herself – theory, books, reflection were tools that made it possible for her to challenge the *status quo*, transcend conditions of family poverty, challenge paternal and maternal male authority, become aware of racial segregation, and react to female castration. Theory was a refuge that allowed her to understand what was happening in the world and how, by critical thinking, it was possible to build “processes of self-recovery and collective liberation” (hooks, 2019a, p. 85).

She suggests that, when theorizing is based on lived experience, there is no gap between theory and practice, since the former follows the trail of disturbance resulting from the feeling of oppression and exclusion. She points out that black feminist theory must overcome the false gulf between theory and practice, considering that the purpose of this separation is “to divide, to separate, to exclude ... silence, censor, and devalue various feminist theoretical voices” (hooks, 2019a, p. 91). For all this, hooks insists on new forms of representation and new regimes of visibility that inhabit contemporary global politics and induces us to a transformative action capable of finding ways to (re)invent a possible world with other ethical, ethnic, and aesthetic *performances*.

The meeting

Paulo Freire and bell hooks emerge in the national and international political scenario in the Cold War period, located between the end of World War II (1945) and the extinction of the Soviet Union (1991), characterized by the dispute between the United States and the Soviet Union. Such rivalry divided the world into two blocs that supported the incompatibility of coexistence between liberal capitalist and planned socialist ideologies, due to their antagonistic positions on: private property, individual freedom, collective equality, market laws, and State intervention, aimed at guaranteeing the basic needs of citizens. The Cold War relied on strategies of power disputes, the search for hegemony, and political, economic, and ideological pressure on countries that could align with the interests of the two powers. In the United States, the red threat marked the second half of the XX century, characterized by the repression of all groups considered communist; by the strengthening of fundamentalist white supremacist groups; by

attacks on public officials, educators, and trade unionists; by investigations and inquiries based on inconclusive suspicions; and by strong police combat against the black population (Mariz, 2021).

The countries of America suffered marked police repression, aimed at oppositionist demonstrations, excessive conservative patriotism, and were the scenario of unfounded accusations against unionized workers, threats and persecution of political associations, and promises of financial aid to countries aligned with the interests of the United States.

Freire, in 1992, describes the juncture that framed the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The book came at a historical juncture filled with intense disquiet. Social movements in Europe, in the United States, in Latin America, in each space-time with its own characteristics. The fight against sexual, racial, cultural, class discrimination, the fight in defense of the environment, the Greens, in Europe. The *coups d'état* with a new face, in Latin America, and its military governments that stretched from the previous decade. The *coups d'état* now ideologically founded, and all of them linked in one way or another to the flagship of the North, in the search of making viable what seemed to be the capitalist destiny of the continent. The guerrillas in Latin America; the grassroots communities, the liberation movements in Africa, the independence of the former Portuguese colonies, the struggle in Namibia, Amílcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, their leadership in Africa, and its repercussion outside Africa. China. Mao. The Cultural Revolution. The living extension of the meaning of May 1968. The political-trade union and pedagogical-trade union struggles, all obviously political ... Guevara assassinated in the previous decade and his presence as a symbol not only for Latin American revolutionary movements, but also for progressive leaders and activists around the world. The Vietnam War and the reaction within the United States. The struggle for civil rights and the spillover of the political-cultural climate from the 1960s in that country to the 1970s. (Freire, 1992, p. 121)

Freire and hooks were accused of taking part in “subversive activities” and were linked to libertarian, civil, and religious movements, which questioned traditional teaching models based on the acquisition of knowledge by ostensible exhibition by the teacher and automatic repetition by the students. They assumed that the meaning of learning is related to the purpose of acting “in creating a world in which it is less difficult to love” (Freire, 1988, p. 184). Nevertheless, he and she moved in the hegemonic center of global capitalism, USA, and published there, in different decades, their works in English.

Freire contrasts the traditional closed society to the open and transitional society; the predatory economy to the economy of life; the traditional pedagogy to the pedagogy of the question, from the explicitness of the “game of contradictions that nourish the overcoming of old themes and the new perception of many of them” (Freire, 2022, p. 69). He criticizes bourgeois public education that operates with fragmentary, insensitive, and abstract contents and defends popular public education, identified with the concrete living conditions of marginalized sectors, in search of cultural elements, generative themes, vocabulary universes that beckon to scenarios of justice and equality (Freire, 1988). He denounces the “sadism of oppressive consciousness, in its necrophilous view of the world ... and in its inside out love – a love of death and not of life” (p. 47).

He also points out that the massification of ways of life in the modern world promotes simplistic interpretations of problems, reinforces past tendencies, inclination to gregariousness, fragility in arguments, strong emotionality, sectarian irrationalism, taste for fabulous explanations impermeable to investigation. He indicates that the appropriation, by humanity, of its position in the local, national, and international context implies awareness and development of criticality, counting on the mediation of the pedagogical work that promotes emancipatory ruptures.

Thus, transformation is not a mechanical process resulting from industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, as proclaimed by developmental theory; on the contrary, it is under constant threat. Therefore, the knowledge of experience is not enough, one must make explicit the situations of conflict and contradiction by debate, dialogue, and the exercise of the contradictory.

Thus, the reading of the world, from the starting point of experience, must be confronted with the exercise of political activity in the public sphere and the positioning before fundamental questions about “in favor of what, of whom; against whom and what” we carry out education (Freire, 1982, p. 97). In this perspective, schooling should be thought of as an action aimed at empowering certain groups and disempowering others in the set of cultural practices and social formations.

Freire’s pedagogy, at the time, overlapped with hooks’ criticism of slavery and the need to value indigenous knowledge by educational practices that meandered other ways of existing, other looks, and other representative practices (Mazza, 2022).

She says that, when she was studying at the University of Santa Cruz, Paulo Freire was invited to conduct a seminar with students and teachers from the Third World. They did everything to prevent her from participating, because they feared that her feminist criticism would interfere with the discussion of important issues. By this time, Freire was about 60 years old and was already an internationally recognized intellectual. hooks was close to 30, in graduate school and beginning her career as a teacher. She wrote:

I protested and was allowed to participate ... my chest was heavy with that sexist attempt to control my voice and the encounter ... This created a war within me, as I wanted to interrogate him about the sexism of his work. So, with courtesy, at the right time I took the initiative in the meeting ... certain people have spoken out against my raising these issues and downplayed their importance. Paulo intervened to say that these questions were crucial and answered them. At that moment, I really loved him, because he exemplified with acts the principles of his work. If he had tried to silence or devalue ... a lot of things would have changed for me ...

I spent hours talking, listening to music, having ice cream with him at my favorite diner ... The lesson I learned from seeing Paulo incorporate into practice what he describes in theory was profound. It entered me, touched me, and gave me courage.

It hasn't been easy to do the work I do and get myself into academia, but I persevere by seeing the example of others. He inspired me. I embraced the contradictions of his sexist behavior as a learning process that one struggles to change, but that struggle takes time. (hooks, 2019a, pp. 78-80)

hooks questioned the sexist language of writers considered progressive:

While reading Freire, at no point did I fail to be aware of the sexism of the language and the way in which he and other progressive Third World political leaders, intellectuals, and critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi etc. built a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation – where freedom and the experience of patriarchal masculinity were linked as if they were the same thing. (2019a, p. 69)

However, she states, in metaphorical language, that she found Freire at a time when she was thirsty for liberation from the condition of a colonized, marginalized subject, who needed to break the prison of the *status quo*. She situates his writings “as water that contains a little earth. As we are thirsty, pride will not prevent us from separating the earth and being nourished ... Freire’s work was a living water to me” (hooks, 2019a, pp. 71-72). She claims that this experience

positioned Paulo, in her life, as a challenging teacher who fueled her struggle against the supremacy of white culture:

I found Freire's work at a time when I was getting to know the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and colonization that takes place within the United States, and I felt identified with the marginalized peasants he speaks of and with my black brothers and sisters, my comrades from Guinea-Bissau. I came to college with the experience of a black woman from the rural South ... I had lived the struggle for racial desegregation and was in the resistance without having a political language to formulate the process. Paulo was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about building an identity in resistance. A phrase by Freire became a revolutionary mantra for me: "*We cannot enter the struggle as objects to become subjects later.*" ... Freire positioned himself, in my mind and in my heart, as a challenging teacher whose work fueled my own struggle against the colonization process and the colonizing mentality. ... he never spoke of awareness as an end in itself, but always to the extent that it adds up to meaningful praxis. (hooks, 2019a, pp. 66-68)

It is not possible to ascertain that hooks' works influenced those of Freire, since she was a student and was beginning her academic career when they met, but he was affected by the criticisms and the relationship they established, and his later texts present markers of this sensitization. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1992) says:

Talking about the language, the taste for metaphors, the sexist mark with which I wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and, before it, *Education as a practice of freedom*, seems important and necessary ... I remember ... the letters I received in 1970, of how, conditioned by authoritarian, sexist ideology, I reacted. ... "Well, when I speak of man, the woman is included". And why aren't men included when we say, "women are determined to change the world? That's what I wanted to show ... my debt to those women, whose letters made me see how much language has ideology.... Discrimination against women, expressed and made by sexist discourse and embodied in concrete practices, is a colonial way of treating them, incompatible, therefore, with any progressive position, from woman or man, it does not matter (pp. 67-68). It was at this time that I came into contact with the harsh reality of one of the most dramatic dimensions of the Third World from the First World. The reality of the so-called immigrant workers ... the experience of racial, class, and sex discrimination. (p. 123)

Aside from Freire's direct indications, there are several testimonies about the reception of his work in the United States and Europe. Trilla I Bernet (1996), from Spain, says:

Freire's focus is not limited to adult education ... and the Third World ... within rich societies, called First World societies, there are enormous social inequalities In addition, one must recognize that awareness is a human phenomenon (p. 646).

That is, regardless of space-time, it is always necessary to decipher reality in order to transform it, since only in this way do we become historical subjects.

Final remarks

The bibliographic sources (May, 2004) highlight the impact that Freire's early works had in the Americas and the effect of his passage through the United States: the translation of his books into English; his exposure to the debate on class, race, sex, and gender inequalities; as well as the unfolding of these facts in the debate on the politicality of education. Citing testimonies from intellectuals who lived with him in the United States, Shor (1996) says that Freire "instigated educators and students to change the way they taught and his book was a guide and inspiration in the fight against authoritarianism in education" (p. 566). Giroux (1996) points out that "his narrative of education is a political project that breaks with the multiple forms of domination and expands the principles and practices of human dignity, freedom, and social justice" (p. 569). For McLaren (1996),

His theory became known to the world and allowed to be read as a kind of counter-narrative to the discourse of the rich, powerful, and privileged ... His work ... put the poor and the oppressed on the stage of history ... The readers ... are confronted with the complicity of the First World in creating oppression on people in the Third World ... Freire is a testimony to the resistance, dignity, and intelligence of the oppressed ... Freire's life and work helped me unlearn my white and Anglo male privileges, and "decolonize" my own perspectives as an educator in the industrialized West (pp. 587-588).

hooks' public criticism of the presence of the phallogocentric paradigm in Freire's work fostered a fertile dialogue and genuine friendship, with repercussions in the field of education, the black feminist movement, and publications. It opened space so that several women were inspired by him to legitimize their uprisings. Hernández (1996), an Argentine indigenous educator, says:

I was meeting Paulo in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and even crossing the border and arriving in Los Angeles ... A generation of American *latinas* learned from him. Words in Portuguese, Spanish and so many indigenous languages were mixed...and thus, we all became literate in our dreams. The lecto-writing in mapudungum-Spanish was thought of from a cheerful *portunhol*, in the cold and rainy south of Chile ... The pedagogy of dialogue and conflict was born. (p. 243)

Abramowicz, a university professor and friend of Paulo, describes the lesson of love she received from him when Elza died, and recalls his words:

I feel the incredible experience of emptiness.... Such a small presence of tomorrow... I don't know how to soften the longing ... I am not the future for my sons and daughters; I am a little of the past and a lot of the present ... I already thought about stopping everything and slowly disappearing ... choosing life is the only way to live and be loyal to Elza! (Freire, reported by Abramowicz, 1996, pp. 202-204)

Viezzler, sociologist, writer, and educator of the Women's Network of Education, questioned Paulo about a feminist popular education methodology, understanding that his work provoked the emergence of relations of domination and oppression:

When working from the perspective of women, the pedagogy of the oppressed must necessarily raise the questions about the various contradictions existing in society that extrapolate the contradictions of social classes. The feminist movement unraveled the reality of oppression of the female gender by the male gender as a constitutive part of social reality, in all social classes. ... It is this social construction that feminists call *Gender Social Relations*, that is, the relationships that have historically been built by society and that, therefore, can change. ... Freire's writings have been used by us to raise this fundamental contradiction in popular education work with women's groups. (Viezzler, 1996, pp. 596-597)

In this debate, the analysis of Freire and hooks' paths suggests that they merged their lives with the dimensions of pedagogy and politics, acted as activists, teachers, and writers in the United States, had their work widespread in several countries of the Americas, and challenged conservative hegemonic positions in defense of an education as a practice of freedom and the deepening of democratic relations in contemporary, unequal, and violent capitalist societies. Paulo joined the education of adults, the popular strata, and the construction of the democratic order. hooks was linked to the cause of black women and the anti-racial, anti-patriarchal, and anti-colonialist struggle. He and she question the authoritarianism of teacher

and student relationships, encourage students to believe in the validity of their experiences as a starting point of the educational process, value non-school education processes, and appreciate dialogue as “processes that generate long social fermentations” (Lima, 2021, p. 1). They defend education as a political exercise, the classroom as a space for confrontation, and pedagogy as a science that produces reports of practices that must raise awareness, denounce, and modify situations of exclusion, oppression, and exploitation. Finally, they conceive as essential a “feminist education, above all, to guide the analysis towards a new interpretation of existing knowledge” (Meyers, 1996, p. 598).

Hence the presence of values such as hope, amorousness, and tolerance, but also indignation, stubbornness, and righteous anger in their contemporary formulations and mediations of insurgent and transgressive pedagogies.

From 1970 to 1980, Paulo lived in Geneva, Switzerland, and worked for the World Council of Churches (WCC). There, he developed advisory activities to various vulnerable social groups, national liberation movements in Africa, organizations in defense of human rights that demanded a popular education project coupled with the struggle for liberation from historically determined forms of oppression. At the WCC, his work was closer to the extension activities that characterized his insertion in Brazil and Chile. In 1971, together with a group of Brazilian exiles, Paulo and Elza founded the Institute of Cultural Action (IDAC), dedicated to participatory-action-research, providing educational services to several developing countries, organizing seminars and workshops, collaborating in the implementation of national literacy programs, and producing didactic-pedagogical materials (Macedo et al., 2013, pp. 39-40). In 1980, Freire returned definitively to Brazil, joined the teaching staff of the University of Campinas (1980 to 1991), joined the Workers’ Party, served as Secretary of Education of the city of São Paulo in the Government of Luiza Erundina (1989 to 1991), collaborated as a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, and, in mid-1991, left all institutions and retired. That same year, back to the United States, he had a dialogue with Myles Horton, with whom he wrote *We make the road by walking: Conversations on Education and social change*.

After a conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, in April 1991, Moacir Gadotti, Carlos A. Torres, Pilar O’Cadiz, Peter McLaren, and Paulo Freire agreed on the creation of the Paulo Freire Institute, based in São Paulo, which today has “21 centers in 18 countries, promoting critical and systematic studies of Paulo Freire’s work, by research,

professional development of educators, and dialogue with other authors” (Macedo et al., 2013, p. 44). He died in São Paulo, aged 75, in May 1997, of myocardial infarction.

bell hooks, similarly, founded in 2014 the bell hooks Institute in Berea, Kentucky, aiming to attract progressive leaders, activists, artists, feminists, black students, LGBTQI+ people to the cause of human rights and social justice, expanding the understanding that the oppression of sex and gender is the product of the combined exercise of patriarchy and white supremacy. She died in Berea, aged 69, in December 2021, from kidney failure.

For Freire and hooks, the United States figured as a gateway to ideas, works, contacts, and publications that promoted an economy of symbolic goods with a strong anchorage in the provisions of international exchanges, in the processes of socialization, in the shared categories of perception and judgment of the works carried out and in the role of publishers, investing in works that – during the temporality of circulation – could be consecrated by peers and reconverted into economic goods (Sapiro, 2017). This dynamic carried out in the hegemonic center and language of global capitalism, regardless of the interested calculation of the parties involved, positioned them at the dominant pole of the struggle for international visibility. It is possible to suggest that Paulo Freire’s editorial success and its incorporation into bell hooks’ studies facilitated the transit of her texts with publishers who initially rejected the writings of a black woman (hooks, 2023, p. 11). We believe that the legitimacy of hooks’ activism and her friendship with Freire have favored his reception among feminist, antiracist, and more radical groups. Both professors cultivate a writing style aimed at readers from subordinate strata, educators, and political activists, distancing themselves from academic standards and approaching them with texts of struggle and self-help. But this is a topic for further discussion.

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