John Hoben
Faculty of Education
Memorial University

hooks, b. (2003) *Teaching Community: a Pedagogy of Hope*. London: Routledge

bell hooks, despite her celebrity, writes in a style which is remarkable for its accessibility and candor. Having established herself as a world renowned critic of culture, race, gender—and, critical studies in education more generally— hooks, in the present volume looks at these themes within the parameters of pluralistic, compassionate communities in a fragmented, harsh, and, alienating age (49). Theoretically, this critical communitarism finds its roots in an eclectic array of cultural influences and theorists, and, hooks own experiences growing up in the segregated, patriarchical, American south.

For hooks, critical teaching, far from being merely abstract and "academic" takes its form through interaction within living, vibrant, cultural communities. Hooks' conception of education as the practice of freedom necessitates creating classrooms where teachers and students alike can become empowered and transformed as they dialogue in intimate, educational settings. Bringing together the public and personal aspects of teaching to create "classrooms without boundaries" (13), hooks reflects upon her own personal experience and the racism and oppression she has faced as a black feminist scholar working within an educational system dominated by "white male capitalist patriarchy".

Such confessional aspects of hooks' text emerge in her analysis of what she terms "psychological splitting wherein someone teaches only in the classroom and then acts as though knowledge is not meaningful in every other setting" (44). Expressing the thoughts of many contemporary critical scholars working in the Academy, hooks notes how, "as an intellectual working as an academic I often felt that my commitment to radical openness and devotion to critical thinking, to seeking after truth, was at odds with the demands that I uphold the status quo if I wanted to be rewarded" (22).

For hooks, the university in many ways espouses a set of values which are predominantly white, middle class and which emphasize an informal sensibility which often removes emotion and passion from teaching environments. In contrast to this sterile regimen, hooks argues for the importance of feeling and desire if the classroom is truly to become a place of radical possibility. However, she cautions, the reification of institutions over communities and local cultures often forces us to recreate our identities in profoundly limiting ways as "unwittingly we become our own gatekeepers… as we close down the imagination's right to say and do what it needs" (170).

For hooks, the refusal of emancipatory, compassionate pedagogies, though it has many cultural and institutional underpinnings, is, like racism itself, a choice (53). In her words, "professors who are most wedded to conventional hierarchy are those most interested in applying a parental paradigm to professors and students" (145). Quite often, hooks maintains, this is a dynamic which is also closely related to inequalities of class, race and gender and what she terms "the eroticization of domination" (148). Yet, in contrast,

education as the practice of freedom is about service as committed intellectuals strive to help individuals find communities where they can at once experience the transformative power of freedom and belonging (83).
Taking a stance against a competitive educational ethic which relies on shame and fear, hooks notes the importance of family and friendship in creating learning communities where knowledge is rooted in deep networks of human relationships (93; 127) For hooks, power isolates and dehumanizes us as it hampers our ability to exercise the imagination as a vehicle of compassion and emancipation. Bridging the gap between other and self with a proleptic radical hope, hooks emphasizes the importance of what Mary Grey calls the "prophetic imagination….a fully public imagination, belonging to the public domain, inspiring the full range of communities belonging to it to commitment to fuller visions of well being" (196).

Yet, as a "dissident intellectual" (187), hooks argues that to overemphasize the public nature of critical education misses the importance of challenging conventional pedagogies' rigid distinctions between teachers' private and professional lives, much as it depersonalizes the classroom by presenting it as a place where we frequently take refuge in passitivity and detachment. Always, hooks argues, education is performative and relational as identities are created through teaching and learning and "we are transformed…by our collective presence" (174)

Speaking of performative identities in a reflexive manner, it is difficult to find fault with hook's motives, her devotion or practical commitment to cultural politics. However, given that identity is relational, it is important to ask whether such confessional, personalized accounts sometimes cause us to forget the difficult and rather profound questions arising out of such radical work. By this I am not trying to call for a more comprehensive, coherent articulation of critical practice (though hooks does indeed provide this elsewhere in her work), but, mindful of my own ambivalence, I am suggesting the danger of glossing over issues which people like hooks live and confront morally and intellectually on a daily basis.

Although critical scholars and cultural critics share a marked aversion to the word rigor, we must not, as hooks suggests, allow compassion to be mistaken for a lack of political will or mental focus. Indeed, part of the ongoing struggle for critical scholars involves engaging the everyday without compromising those aspects of our work which hooks terms "intellectual". Quite often, this involves teaching against the grain in ways whose straightforwardness and accessibility belie their sophistication and complexity. While this is predominantly an issue of audience and the discipline's political aims, given the simplistic, pejorative interpretations of many on the right, it is an issue worth addressing – particularly in relation to someone as forthright and brilliant as hooks.

But this is a problem which also arises on the part of those within critical communities who violate the terms of trust and fidelity which committed political activists and intellectuals share. All too often, perhaps, newcomers to critical disciplines internalize the field's lexicon and frameworks without recognizing the challenges posed by a pedagogy which seek to engender radical personal and political change. In contrast, recognizing the

challenges – existential or otherwise – inherent in such pedagogical spaces requires deep courage and commitment. Realizing the costs of struggle, then, we must always remain aware that the cultural and personal space we call community, like subjectivity itself, is part of a broader struggle to wrench hope and desire from authoritarian domination and despair. A work in progress, then, but work nonetheless.