

The Way Forward and Through: Play as Transformative Pedagogy

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By way of introducing this collection of essays exploring the role of play in the liberal arts classroom, I would like to invite you, gentle reader, to take a moment. Can we pause and take a collective breath? Consider what it means now, more than ever, to enact bell hooks's radical vision of joyful, transgressive teaching and learning. What would it mean, in this moment, for us to "think and rethink, so that we can create new [pedagogical] visions"?¹

This historical moment, in which we find the very foundations of a liberal arts education under assault, hooks's reminder in *Teaching to Transgress* that "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy"² should be not just our hope but a provocation for enacting the futures we wish to see—now—and for moving "against and beyond boundaries."³ hooks's gift to us is the understanding that the most radical and transgressive of acts is to teach with a love that enacts pleasure and joy in learning.

In "Mock Trials and Role Playing: Rethinking Social Justice in the Classroom," Nidhi Shrivastava's approach to teaching difficult historical events such as the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, the Holocaust, and the Rwandan genocide serves as a model for the ethical engagement with role-playing. Students develop the skills to navigate the difficult and the incomprehensible and "grapple with issues of restorative and social justice and ultimately reflect on what it truly means to be human." The pleasure here comes from encountering the difficult and imagining different possibilities for the future of humanity.

In "'Musicologists' Creed': Digital Interactive Fiction, Historical Role-Play, and the Pedagogy of Contingent Narrative," Christopher J. Smith sees students encounter and wrestle with contingencies of history. Located at the intersection of music history, role-playing, and digital narrative building, Smith's course, "Music of the Long Twentieth Century," asks us to rethink not only the conventional modes of assessment but also pedagogical methods that might stifle both creative and critical thinking. Students in the course are asked an important question: what does it mean to understand history not as a set event, fixed in time, but rather as a series of contingencies *in the moment* that engendered multiple possibilities?

Stephanie P. Jones, in "The Limits of Play: Classroom Pedagogies Amidst Anti-Blackness," balances the transformative possibilities of play with the caution that play that is "not rooted in anti-colonial, critical, and feminist frameworks" could be both "impactful and violent," and might do more harm, particularly to historically marginalized students. She invites us

to consider hooks's ethic of care and to reassess whether our pedagogical practices take into account the experiences of all students and how they might respond to "play."

The final essay, "Playing to Transgress: The Black Girls' Playdate as a Liberatory Praxis" is my attempt to model hooks's liberatory praxis through the development of Black Girls' Playdate. Reflecting on the historical experiences of Black girls in the context of education, I worked with students to co-create a space of play that is liberatory, cultivates joy in learning, and demonstrates the power to create community within and outside of the classroom.

This forum's essays invite us to consider play in the liberal arts classroom as a tool for transformation; how we enact play—with ethics of love and care, joy, and with an orientation to pleasure—can move us beyond the boundaries of not just what is acceptable, but what is inconceivable. Play holds transformative possibilities, whether it is in the teaching of difficult subjects such as genocide, wrestling with the contingencies of history, alerting us to the dangers of play in our pedagogy, or enacting play as a tool for community building. In this collection each author demonstrates that what is at the core of their pedagogy is the human condition.

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.