The Limits of Play: Classroom Pedagogies Amidst Anti-Blackness

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Play in the classroom, whether it is guided, social, or play-based teaching, is significant to human development and the acquisition of skills and experience which can be accessed across a person's entire lifespan.[1] On the one hand, play as a pedagogical practice can offer room for participants to engage in multiple forms of transformation, all of which are embedded in the personal and the political. On the other hand, play as pedagogical practice, regardless of its original intention, also has the power to diminish or trivialize the histories and people that have shaped the contexts through which we live. Both positions are worth considering, especially when we reflect on the implications of play within the liberal arts classroom.

As a Black woman educator and college professor, the question that I ask repeatedly is: How do I facilitate a space where radical possibilities can thrive? Using play in the classroom is not a new concept. The research on social play and play-based teaching and learning activities have shown to increase children's ability to be social with others, practice higher level cognitive skills, and develop their ability to communicate for a variety of purposes.[2] Despite the clear evidence that play is a necessary form of social engagement, play has steadily decreased in classrooms for young children. More than likely an answer to international test scores, classrooms in the U.S. have shifted to becoming more academically focused, which equates to more time in seats, not engaging in physical play or play through pedagogy. While I plead for the use of more play in classrooms, I do so with a caveat. I must interrogate what, if any, are the limitations of play? I claim that when critical educators develop a consciousness around how play is used and for what reason, we can perhaps avoid, at best, the limitations of play, and at its worst, the violence that can occur.

I frame this essay with the understanding that classroom teaching and learning can create change. It is this very power that can either invoke fear or inspiration from those who are aware of what change can create. To do this important work, classrooms, and what we do within them for the good of ourselves and each other, must be able to consider context. I define context as the understanding of the multiple lived realities that we choose and are chosen for us. I lean heavily on bell hooks as a pedagogical mentor,

as she reminds us that the context by which all of us live, work, and teach is within a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[3] Our classrooms are no exception. To imagine new worlds, to embody what is radical, is to create change despite these interlocking structures of power.

What makes a classroom a radical space of possibility? The term radical derives etymologically from the Latin words *radix* and *radic*, meaning root. In this sense, radical can be defined as the way students and educators participate in *forming the root*. For example, hooks describes the need for recognition and contribution of every single member in the classroom. This need must be "valued" and "ongoing" with the expectation that every person-as-contribution is seen as a resource.[4] hooks's remarks that her teachers, who were predominately Black women, were, "committed to nurturing intellect" and practiced a "pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anti colonial."[5] Her teachers practiced a type of root-forming through their acknowledgment and deep care of students. Unfortunately, traditional sit-and-get lectures that prioritize the facilitator's presence and knowledge over other members of the classroom have always been modeled as exemplar instruction. However, these idyllic representations fall short because it is also representative of our intellectual idolization of one formally educated person. Education that is not rooted in anti-colonial, critical, and feminist frameworks are vulnerable to conflating and ignoring the varied perspectives of students, especially those whose voices have been historically marginalized. We can't consider our classrooms, or even ourselves, as radical, if we promote a false equivalency of intelligence to our student's ability to comply and agree.

Classroom play is integral to a liberatory education, one that insists on educating all to recognize and address issues of power while also being pedagogically sound. I complicate the use of play by arguing that within a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context, play should be critiqued in productive and critical ways. Classroom play in the form of role play, simulations, and games are familiar ways to support a student's understanding of curriculum. These experiences create deep connective threads between the content and a student's understanding of it in real time. As educators, we aim to (re)create experiences and lessons that will stick with students beyond our classroom walls. However, there are some curricula and activities that, despite our best efforts, create harm. Educators are not immune from pedagogical errors. Despite what the literature suggests about classroom play, simulations, and games, little has been offered to consider how play can be both impactful and violent. One of the ways that we can actively work against harmful play in the classroom is through the recognition of anti-Blackness and racial trauma.

Although hooks didn't use the term anti-Blackness in her text *Teaching to Transgress*, I believe that she did describe the ways that she experienced it in her formal schooling experiences. For example, after her integration into white schools, it was assumed that Black students "were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn."[6] This is the root of anti-Blackness, the understanding that "Black personhood has been constructed as inhuman, expendable, and perpetually fixed as a problem."[7] hooks's depiction of her white peers' and teachers' responses to her and other Black students exemplifies a broader framework of antiblackness—one that inevitably shapes our research and influences how we pedagogically introduce our discipline to students.

The National Center for PTSD recognizes that racism, racial discrimination, and race-related stress can manifest as traumatic experiences.[8] When hooks discusses the demand for "obedience to authority,"[9] she recalls what she names as an "undercurrent of stress."[10] In our liberal arts classrooms, this stress can resemble a single Black student enrolled in a course or major, an overreliance on Black students to be both content experts on the Black experience and remain emotionally soothing to their non-Black professor and peers, being accused of plagiarism, or questioned on their admittance into the course or institution. As we consider how racial trauma can be a part of the educational experiences for our students, it is incumbent of us to ask: Is it possible that despite our best efforts as professors, that our curriculum, readings, and assignments create a type of racial stress? Within a framework of anti-Blackness, this possibility is almost always probable.

There is a specific name for this form of racial stress in the classroom: curriculum violence. Curriculum violence is defined as "the deliberate manipulation of academic programming in a manner that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological well being of learners."[11] Despite schooling efforts to make curriculum more inclusive and multicultural, there are still many instances of curriculum violence in classrooms from kindergarten to college. Play, within an environment of anti-Blackness and racial trauma, can lead to harmful outcomes. For example, students in a collegiate American history course may be asked to write from the perspective of an enslaver to assess whether they understand and can describe specific aspects of the slave trade in the Americas. However, the objective of having a student provide a description does not have to come in the method of impersonation or even imagination—we can simply ask them to provide description, analysis, and critique. By asking our students, deliberately or otherwise, to engage with the materials in a way that requires us to place themselves within an oppressor's role is hollow and uncritical. We must consider the multiple ways that students have been asked to participate in

activities, readings, and exams where they are asked to mirror oppression as a form of learning. Play in the liberal arts classroom can take up these types of scenarios swiftly and without regard for the well-being of everyone who must participate.

What we must consider in the realm of anti-Blackness, racial trauma, and curriculum violence is that no classroom participant, whether educator or student, leaves unscathed. It is important that we examine the impact of these activities over time. Repeated acts of curriculum violence do not meet our aim of a radical classroom. Instead, this violence reproduces the structures that help to maintain oppression, marginalization, and discrimination. By situating play as a conduit to practice or imagine difficult histories, we are facilitating a hidden curriculum—one where we can replicate historical harms of our disciplines with no consideration of who is required to participate. Traumatic play, such as impersonating an enslaver, does not translate the atrocities of slavery. Instead, it asks students to embody a negligent identity and rationalize its choices to commit forced labor, torture, and family separation. Is this type of play necessary for students to be engaged?

What hooks asks us to consider is the call to be more engaged in the classroom. Our engagement in the classroom is squarely situated as a model of resistance. Classrooms are places where we can not only dispel rigid binary systems that keep us stagnate, but do so in a way that resists the traditional reactions of "boredom, uninteresting, and apathy"[12] that appear in many of our classrooms. As liberal arts professors, our commitment to teaching coincides with the notion that we strive to provide our students with a type of education that is interdisciplinary and holistic. We desire for our students to see the connections between theatre and physics, or art history and education. To make these strong associations, educators must have a commitment to teaching that prioritizes excitement, interest, and engagement. It is quite normal that while prioritizing these areas of focus, educators might use play to engage in this work. Our use of play is not the problem, or even our intentions behind our ideas for using it. Yet, we must engage with play in the way that we want students to engage with the material: with care and reflection.

Rethinking play in liberal arts classrooms may involve redesigning pedagogical strategies and activities so that student engagement and criticality are prioritized. The pedagogical goal of problematizing play in the classroom is essential to create spaces that allow for new interpretations of how it functions. Play should not undermine difficult histories for the sake of engagement. Instead, we can reclaim a kind of play that propels our students to imagine in liberatory ways.

[1] Meghan Lynch, "More Play, Please: The Perspective of Kindergarten Teachers on Play in the Classroom," *American Journal of Play* 7, no. 3 (2015), 347–70.
[2] Elena Bodrova, Carrie Germeroth, and Deborah J. Leong, "Play and Self-Regulation: Lessons from Vygotsky," *American Journal of Play* 6, no. 1 (2013): 111–23.
[3] George Yancy and bell hooks, "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness," *New York Times,* December 10, 2015, https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/bell-hooks/?ref=rootschangmedia.com., accessed March 10, 2025.
[4] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 8.
[5] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 2.
[6] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 4.
[7] Stephanie P. Jones and Robert P. Robinson, "Reflections on the Politics of Professionalism: Critical Autoethnographies of Anti-Blackness in the ELA Classroom," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education* 16, no. 2 (2021).
[8] "Racial Trauma," PTSD: National Center for PTSD, United States Department of Veteran Affairs, March 10, 2025, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/racial_trauma.asp.
[9] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 4.
[10] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 5.
[11] Erhabor Ighodaro and Greg A. Wiggan. *Curriculum Violence: America's New Civil Rights Issue* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2010), 2.
[12] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 10.