

Teaching to Transgress' Death Drive, or bell hooks as Educator

by ANDRÉS FABIÁN HENAO CASTRO

Abstract

Placing desire in the pedagogical milieu, this article is about the revolutionary desire articulated in bell hooks' radical pedagogy. I trace the liberatory force of hooks' radical pedagogy back to her *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks 1994). More importantly, I reinterpret that teaching as the setting in motion of a death drive that orients critical thinking towards the destruction of the Symbolic order of our desires, influenced by the political interpretation of this psychoanalytical category in the queer theory of Lee Edelman (2004). Thus, I claim that *Teaching to Transgress* succeeds in destroying an affective attachment to domination by killing the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal super-ego injunction to enjoy life as such, that is, life unmitigated by additional adjectives that would complicate the universality of its reach. *Teaching to Transgress* enacts such a death drive by making us confront the relational dependency of the Symbolic order of "life" upon the "social death" of Real others in the alienated structure that organizes the exchangeability of our desires. The suffering involved in undoing that relation becomes the condition of possibility for an emancipated enjoyment and one that, as I conclude in this article, requires us to learn the dance of social death, and through that dance, jo[y]in the liberation.¹

Teaching to Transgress' Death Drive

Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end

bell hooks

Originally published in 1994, bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* has become a classic of radical pedagogy, understood as a mode of education oriented towards liberation

¹ This reflection was inspired by the conversations of the "radical pedagogy" group at the 2017 *Atelier de théorie critique* in Paris. I thank all the participants in the workshop, as well as the two blind reviewers and Kathleen E. Feyh, for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

from inter-locking systems of oppression. Educated by the intersectional tradition of black feminism—from the early intervention of the Combahee River Collective (1972) to the reclamation of the erotic in the poetry of Audre Lorde (1978)—hooks orients the critical power of education towards an undoing of the Symbolic order. That order, into which we have all been historically socialized, hooks summarizes as the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal order.² Hooks names the liberatory negativity of that undoing as the power of teaching to transgress, and I argue in this article that such a transgression should be understood as the pedagogical equivalent to the death drive, inasmuch as the emancipatory capacity of this drive may destroy an affective attachment to domination. The destructive capacity of hooks' radical pedagogy is clearly enunciated by one of her students, who claimed that after learning "to look at the world from a critical standpoint, one that considers race, sex, and class," "[they couldn't] enjoy life anymore" (hooks 1994: 42). Other students collectively confirmed that feeling by nodding, and hooks realized, "for the first time that there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches" (ibid: 43).³ Aware of critical theory's refusal to accept the given as the horizon of the possible, or in the Brechtian-sounding terms of hooks, "in creating estrangement where there was none" (ibid: 43), I became interested in the pain that teaching to transgress is capable of inflicting, a pain that I claim desirable when seeking to liberate our desires from the symbolic order's injunction to enjoy.⁴ This article is an effort to understand the liberatory importance of inflicting that pain, which I argue does not belong to the order of desire but to the negativity of the death drive.

Freud first introduced the concept of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which Lacan then elaborated in his Seminar *Encore* (1972-73). The order of desire differs from that of drive to the extent that while the former seeks satisfaction through the possession of the missing object—thus acquiring a metonymic structure given that no object can ever stand for *the* object of desire, hence the compulsion to

² This way of naming the symbolic order recurs in all of hooks' trilogy on pedagogy, from *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks 1994: 26, 47, 71, 81, 123) to *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (hooks 2003: xiii, 10, 11, 30, 141, 166, 182), to *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (hooks 2010: 24, 29, 39, 110, 113, 142, 171).

³ In the last book of the trilogy hooks (2010: 138) returns to this same experience of pain produced by shifting paradigms.

⁴ The problem of desire in a pedagogical space hooks addresses at the level of the erotic, which she rightly highlights is irreducible to the sexual. My analysis, however, places transgression at the level of the drive and, in that sense, differs considerably from her discussion on the erotic. Of special interest on the question of desire and pedagogy are hooks' chapter on "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process" in *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks 1994: 191-200), "Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love" in *Teaching Community* (hooks 2003: 127-138), and "Touch" and "To Love Again" in *Teaching Critical Thinking* (hooks 2010: 153-164).

exchange it—the latter aims at its own satisfaction. In other words, in the case of the drive objects are, as Copjec (2004: 38) rightly argues, only an “alibi or prop serving the end of satisfaction.” This means that while desire “focuses on the *objects of value*”—the different and ultimately exchangeable food by which one’s hunger can be satisfied—drive focuses on “*value as object*” (emphasis in the original, Tomšič 2015: 123), the urge to eat “as the object itself through whichever food serves as prop” (Copjec 2004: 52).⁵ By placing hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* at the level of drive I claim that radical pedagogy aims not only at the undoing of the different and ultimately exchangeable desires that we have learned to enjoy in the Symbolic order, but at the structural logic that supports the exchangeability of differences in the first place. In that sense, my political revaluation of the death drive is inspired by Lee Edelman’s (2004) liberatory interpretation of this category through the figure of the “queer.” Radicalizing queer theory’s dis-identificatory drive, Edelman claimed that

Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing the gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed. Queerness, therefore, is never a matter of being or becoming, but, rather, of *embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order (Edelman 2004: 24-25).

Identity politics, as important as it is, operates at the level of desire. By moving from identity to futurity, Edelman places queerness at the most radical level of the drive. Thus, queerness does not belong to the ontological order of the human. Queerness cannot be, as it is neither an identity (being), nor the perpetual difference that temporarily affixes into one (becoming), but the more radical force undoing identity. In response to criticisms by Muñoz (2009: 91-96) of the unaddressed whiteness Edelman’s queerness reproduces, my linking of hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* to the liberatory negativity Edelman attributes to the death drive through the figure of the queer finds a precedent in James Bliss’ recent interpretation of his work. Equally influenced by the black feminist tradition, Bliss rightly highlights that under an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal Symbolic order, gender-non-conforming black women are Edelman’s Real queers (Bliss 2015: 89). As Bliss argues, such an intersectional embodiment of the remainder should not be understood in essentialist terms. That embodiment is not the cumulative result of adding the marginalized identities through

⁵ My reference to food, although prominent in the explanation of this psychoanalytical distinction between desire and the drive, is undoubtedly influenced by hooks’ (1993: 21) analysis of the “commodification of Otherness” as a form of “eating the other.”

which we experience ourselves as subjects but, in less essentialist terms, it is the historical effect of being confined to the intersection of various inter-locking systems of oppression. Saturated coercion produces the (non)positional void that structures the Symbolic order, a non-position that gender-non-conforming black women have always resisted and continue to render undoable. Thus, Bliss is right when qualifying this non-positionality of the Real as one of universal singularity. The liberatory potential of that condition is most clearly articulated by the Combahee River Collective Statement that Bliss cites, when claiming that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (cited in Bliss 2015: 89).⁶ The drive of critical thinking to transgress the Symbolic order locates this destructive power at the level of education, and it inflicts pain wherever thought remains attached to domination.

For an educator who spends perhaps too much time around ancient tragedies, the relationship between teaching and pain was obviously not new to me. “Suffer and learn,” the chorus in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* claims Zeus established as a law (Aeschylus, A ∫∫176-183), and I was less surprised by hooks’ student’s statement. But if suffering is lawfully demanded from the labor of critical pedagogy, what is being transgressed when transgression results in pain? Thinking about “transgression” in the context of “laws,” I was reminded of Georges Bataille’s (1986: 63-64) claim that “transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” when the prohibition actually incites to perform that which it prohibits, as in “the absurd proposition: ‘The taboo is there in order to be violated.’” And yet, when suffering is what is prescribed, as in Zeus’ law, what would it mean for transgression to transcend and complete that law? Here we encounter the incommensurability between the Law of the Father and what I prefer to refer to as critical pedagogy’s transgressive lawlessness. While the former turns the subject into the object of the Other’s enjoyment, the latter seeks to interrupt that joy in order to liberate desire. Thus hooks joins Bataille in linking *eros* to death via the liberatory potential of critical theory’s capacity to kill those alienated joys. In other words, the capacity of teaching to transgress to make “life” no longer enjoyable is the condition of possibility not for a different (forbidden/repressed) joy, as in the exchangeable object of one’s desire, but for an altogether different structure of *jouissance* (drive) that no longer makes joy rest on the suffering of those who are “othered.”

⁶ I do not agree with Bliss’ claim that Edelman’s politics are white (Bliss 2015: 86). A careful reading of his interpretation of James Baldwin’s work disproves this (Edelman 1994: 42-75), even if the absence of other non-white authors in his work does support Bliss’ claim that Edelman’s experiences as well as his archive are white. I also make reference to Edelman’s work on Baldwin because hooks’ criticism of the phallus serves as the epigraph that informs Edelman’s critique of homophobia, further strengthening the connection that I am seeking to establish between teaching to transgress and the death drive. For a more intersectional analysis of Lacanian psychoanalysis see Seshadri-Crooks (2000).

Following Bataille's insights on transgression and the ruptured subjectivity involved in its practice, I would like to return to Lacan's reformulation of desire as an *extimate* experience, that is, as something that happens inside the subject but that actually belongs to the Other, in order to further clarify that which teaching to transgress drives to death:

man's [sic] desire is the Other's desire, in which the *de* provides what grammarians call a 'subjective determination'—namely, that it is *qua* Other that man [sic] desires...This is why the Other's question—that comes back to the subject from the place from which he [sic] expects an oracular reply—which takes some such form as '*Che vuoi?*' 'What do you want?' is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his [sic] own desire (Lacan 2006: 690).

Commenting on Lacan's ambiguous formulation, that it is *qua* Other that man [sic] desires, Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between two interpretations. One is desire as produced by the "decentered" structure of the big Other, or the Symbolic order that hooks rightly identifies as that of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Within this understanding, Žižek adds, "even when my desires are transgressive, even when they violate social norms, this very transgression relies on what it transgresses" (2006: 42). This statement should not be taken as a critique of hooks: reliance does not mean endorsement, and teaching how to transgress the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that structures our Symbolic reality and determines the objects of our desires is not a call for its legitimation. Transgression means, first and foremost, a troubling of this Law's givenness and a refusal to accept it as the horizon of the possible. On the other hand, to this first formulation Žižek opposes another one in which the Other is the site of an "unfathomable desire," in which the enigmatic desire of the Abyssal Other "confronts me with the fact that I myself do not know what I really desire, with the enigma of my own desire" (ibid: 42). What Žižek fails to add, however, is that there exists a relationship between the first and the second formulations, between desire as a given set of exchangeable objects in the dominant and interlocking structures of oppression and desire as an unknown abyss beyond the confines of the Symbolic order. If the first formulation identifies the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal Symbolic order as the decentered structure of my own desires—the "life" that hook's students were able to enjoy, prior to the acquisition of their new critical standpoint—the second formulation refers to the infinity of enjoyment (*jouissance*), the truly unknown joys a critical view of this Symbolic order that one opens up oneself towards, where joy might need to be conceived anew.

There is pain involved in the liberation of desire. Critical pedagogy must first expose the alienation of the student's desires in the Symbolic order, but the liberation of joy in the Real world only happens when that exposure results in the destruction of the

student's affective attachment to those desires. On the one hand, there is the pain that results from a deep disappointment with the big Other, particularly when the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal order is not enforced by a Zeus-like figure, nor even by an Orwellian Big Brother, but by the "banality of evil" of its agents (borrowed from Arendt 2006). This includes one's pathetic parents, and hooks (1994: 43) says as much when she refers to her "white students" who, after "learning to think more critically about questions of race and racism," go to their homes for the "holidays and suddenly see their parents in a different light." In the context of greater visibility of police brutality in the U.S. against black and brown people, I can only imagine the kind of light with which the white students in my own classroom see their parents after they read, for the first time, Frank B. Wilderson's claim that "white people are not simply 'protected' by the police, they *are* the police" (2010: 82). Wilderson's claim leads me to an additional experience of pain, when the big Other can no longer be so easily located in the outside—not even in the pathetic personifications of one's exchangeable Father-figures, be they fathers, mothers, teachers, priests, bosses, and so on—that is, when one realizes one's own pathetic personification of the big Other—and the *also* is relevant in order to avoid the hyper-narcissistic identification with the Symbolic order as such. This realization, as in Wilderson's "*are*," I should clarify, does not only concern "white students." Depending on one's positionality in the Symbolic order, one might *be* the police in more or less structural, if not in more empirical ways too. One might simultaneously occupy some policing positions while being systematically subjected to others, and those positions might not be immediately transparent to oneself. What I want to highlight is that the realization of one's embodiment of this "big Otherness" always entails a different kind of pain, and one that cannot be so easily generalizable. "Guilt," for example, takes on different forms. The guilt that white students feel at the public discussion of their inter-generational privilege is not the same guilt students of color feel when they realize the ways in which they police their own bodies for not having the "proper" color in the somatic order of white-supremacy, or the "proper" sex in a patriarchal system. And feelings such as "guilt" are more often students' last refuge in order to avoid confronting the structural forms of domination in which they are implicated, and the different agential levels that reproduce the policing logic of the "proper."⁷ In sum, depending on one's positionality, unlearning one's desirous attachment to the order of the "proper" might be more or less painful, and the resistance to critical theory's destructive capacities might be stronger. And yet, as Nietzsche claimed, a youthful soul cannot attain the joy that liberation generates "so long as it lies fettered by the chains of fear and convention" (2007: 127).

⁷ The literature on white guilt is quite extensive, I would limit myself to suggest the work of Srivastava (2005) and Todd and Abrams (2011), given their focus on pedagogical spaces, and would like to thank Karen Suyemoto for drawing my attention to these texts, among others.

bell hooks as Educator

“your educators can be only your liberators”

Friedrich Nietzsche

But there is another pain, one perhaps more difficult for critical educators to confront. This pain relates to the political limitations of critical pedagogy, when challenging ideology and destroying hegemonic modes of thinking do not immediately translate into a liberated subjectivity among students. To understand pedagogy as one milieu of desire among others is to understand the gap that separates the *diagnostic* capacities of a critical viewpoint from the *prescription* or *enactment* of the collective actions a radical transformation of the Symbolic order would entail. Here I am not returning to a regressive distinction between theory and practice, dissecting the Real in order to isolate the pedagogical space from the Symbolic ordering of the world in the style of Plato’s founding of the Academy after his traumatic experience of Socrates’ execution. The imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal order is as hegemonic, if not more so, in the Academy, as it is in other spaces. What follows hooks’ (1994: 43) realization of the pain her teaching was capable of inflicting is a critique of the “native informant” role the often “lone person of color in the classroom” is forced to assume. Therefore, if I emphasize the gap between *diagnosis* and *prognosis* it is in order to demystify the emancipatory power of teaching, enunciated in the fantasy: “if only everyone could take bell hooks’ class...” And here hooks indexes a multiplicity of critical educators, as one could easily replace her name with the educator who performed, for them, that critical shift of the “viewpoint.” Paulo Freire (1974) would arguably be hooks’ (1994: 6) choice here. As with fantasy’s capacity to obfuscate the Real, however, the desire for everyone to take hooks’ class is often a cover-up to avoid the more difficult question of why only some can actually take it, where “taking it” refers not only to being officially enrolled in it, but to be in a disposition to learn from it. That is to say both—and they are related—why only some students have access, in this double sense, to critical thinking, but also why are there no more transgressive black-female-gender-non-confirming-educators in the academy?⁸ That is not to say, to avoid the essentialist trap, that black-female-gender-non-confirming-educators are the only instructors that can teach to transgress, which is obviously not true. It is, in short, to stress the need to

⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of racial and sexual embodiment in the classroom see hooks (1994: 77-110; 2010: 95-102), for a different albeit related reflection on this intersectional embodiment in the classroom see Johnson (2003: 219-256) and Alexander (2005: 249-265).

confront the structural and exclusive outcomes of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal system hooks seeks to transgress, as a structuring factor of the pedagogical system as a whole, of the differential effects of its systemic silences and erasures.

This is the proper place to voice my disappointment with the otherwise beautiful book by Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), arguably the other most important book of the early nineties alongside hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* that seeks to orient education towards emancipation. Despite his ruthless criticism of "the explicative system" that rests on the re-production of the distance between the teacher (*explicator*) as the possessor of knowledge and the student as dispossessed of it through the very active drive seeking to eliminate that distance, Rancière (1991: 15) nevertheless relapses into fantasy when he considers that in order "to emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind." I should say that I wholeheartedly agree with the lesson that Rancière (1991: 18) extracts from his ignorant schoolmaster (Joseph Jacotot, the main conceptual character of the book), namely that "*all men [sic] have equal intelligence*" (emphasis in the original). Rancière is right when he claims that equality is not "an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance" (ibid: 139). Such a presupposition is the distinctive characteristic of any radical pedagogy. I also share his dream of a "society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists," in which all "would repudiate the division between those who know and those who don't, between those who possess or don't possess the property of intelligence" (ibid: 71). I remain skeptical, however, that merely by being conscious of "the true power of the human mind" such dream could be realized, as if such realization did not also require an active contestation of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal system that makes critical thinking and learning a privilege, only available to the few. Here I add, perhaps unfairly, that this individualistic, quasi-self-help injunction to be "conscious of the true power of the human mind" as all one needs to emancipate oneself and others may be quite in tune with the neoliberal do-it-yourself credo of today. What about the collective call to decolonize the University, for example, when one realizes that white men from only five European countries still hold a hegemonic position in the production of knowledge?⁹ What about the collective struggles against a capitalist system that makes access to education contingent upon students' increasing indebtedness, thus limiting students' capacities to engage more critically with their education and with their world upon graduation? What about the related struggles against the neoliberal vocationalization of teaching, depreciated as a job-skills-training-program? Can all these struggles—and the many others not

⁹ For more on this see the various essays edited in Grosfoguel, Hernández, and Velásquez (2016).

mentioned here around ability, sexuality, linguistic proficiency, and so on—be equally addressed by mere consciousness of “the true power of the human mind”? If they cannot, can intellectual emancipation really come about without a confrontation of these systems of exclusion? There is, in short, pain involved in the realization that individual intellectual self-emancipation is not sufficient, that naming the big Other and confronting its brutality and banality do not immediately translate into the realization of a new conception of *jouissance* existing beyond its reach. What often follows such confrontations, not unrelated to the desecration of Jacotot’s tombstone in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, is more pain, for example from the death-threats that critical educators receive with shocking frequency, the denials of tenure by Boards of Trustees, the adjunctification of pedagogical labor, the effective marginalization of critical scholars via the rejection of their publications, and the restriction of their research funds, among others. The pedagogical milieu of teaching to transgress is thus irreducible to the classroom, and these related confrontations must not only be undertaken, their injuries must also be addressed for liberation to be a Real break from the Symbolic order.

In one sense Jacotot’s emancipatory embrace of ignorance under the formulation: “one can teach what one doesn’t know” does correspond to the death drive that I am ascribing to hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*. As Rancière rightly claims, Jacotot’s formula stands in opposition to the disingenuous ignorance of Socrates, whose claim “the only thing I know is that I don’t know anything” (slightly modified from Plato, A §§21d-e), Rancière (1991: 29) rightly criticizes as a “perfected form of stultification.” Unlike Socrates’ formula, Jacotot’s is homologous to Lacan’s definition of love, as “giving something one doesn’t have to someone who does not want it,” which is precisely the way in which the death drive delivers its emancipatory enjoyment. What does hooks give to her students that she does not have, herself, if she does have the critical standpoint they presumably acquire through her transgressive teaching? Might it be the pain that she saw “for the first time” her teaching was able to inflict? Is not the (necessary) recognition of that pain, the pain that destroying attachment to the Symbolic order inflicts, the condition of possibility for another joy, inclusive of the joy involved in transgressing it? And did not hooks experience some kind of joy in the student’s description of her class as having the capacity to make them enjoy life no more, beyond the potentially narcissistic implications of that statement? When the otherwise anesthetized joy for “life” is a cover-up for the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal super-ego injunction to enjoy life as such—that is, life unencumbered by additional adjectives that would complicate the universality of its reach—is there not a satisfaction of a critical educator’s desire in the Other’s verbal recognition of one’s capacity to kill that joy? Beyond the otherwise dangerous assimilation of hooks into the big Other’s capacity to administer joy, hinted at in her own problematic recognition of this scene as one teaching her to “practice compassion” (hooks 1994: 42), the statement does testify to the power of critique to destroy an affective attachment to domination.

Critique's joy, however, does not reside in what Žižek (2009: 4) characterizes as the "parallax view." The parallax shift of the gaze does make it possible to see "life," that is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal "life" as the "social death" of Real others (a term first coined by Patterson [1982] and expanded in afro-pessimist thought to problematize the structural anti-blackness that is foundational to colonial modernity).¹⁰ And there is, undoubtedly, great joy for both the student and the educator involved in that shift, but the greatest joy critique provides resides in the unfolding of life's power beyond the confines of "life" established by the social order's governing laws. For Real life to be an "absolute immanence," a "complete power, complete bliss" (Deleuze 2001: 27), as Deleuze's own critique of the despotism of the Signifier suggests, the Symbolic joys of "life" need first to die. And hooks' teaching to transgress drives those Symbolic joys to death.

The liberatory capacity of a pedagogy oriented towards transgression explains the Nietzschean echo of this article and my claim that hooks is the educator of our times, following Nietzsche's celebration of Schopenhauer as the educator of his time (1874). This echo, however, also recognizes in hooks' drive to transgress that which Nietzsche eventually lamented in Schopenhauer's pessimism, and that which Deleuze (2001, 69 and 73) celebrated in Nietzsche himself: the joy of creation beyond the representational constraints of "life." In other words, *Teaching to Transgress* succeeds even where Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (1882) fails in supplementing the revolutionary drive of life's absolute immanence with an emancipatory music. This music demarcates not a horizon but a point of departure, equality as the presupposition of its liberatory practice. Beyond Rancière, hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* makes this emancipatory presupposition relationally inseparable from the pain involved in a radical confrontation with the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal order of our desires. And it is in this relational sense that one should interpret the last words of Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), where he ventriloquizes Aeschylus' reply to the stranger's celebration of the strong Dionysian spirit he found among in the people of Hellenes and their need for Apollo to cure them of their dithyrambic madness: "Yet say this too, you miraculous stranger: how much must this people have suffered in order to become so beautiful!" (Nietzsche 2000: 131). Is not the "much" suffering that results from hooks' teaching her own way of philosophizing with a hammer, of destroying the idols of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy? Is it not this suffering the pedagogical condition for becoming a beautiful transgressor? Are not hooks' students most beautiful at the precise moment when they can no longer enjoy life, when joy finally leaves the big Other's dwellings in "life"? When joy demands to be pursued into the abyssal Otherness

¹⁰ On afro-pessimism's troubling of the racialized distinction between life and death see Sexton (2011), for a more intersectional understanding of social death, equally influential for afro-pessimism, see the seminal article of Spillers (1987).

of liberation in death, in Wilderson's (2007: 32) beautiful formulation of learning the steps "to the dance of social death"? In short, I answer that the inevitably painful recognition of "life's" joys in the Symbolic order, as the ideological fantasy obfuscating the Reality of this order's systematic production of "social death," is the condition of possibility for an emancipated enjoyment.

Against the symbolic structuration of our desires through the constant iteration of their lack—that is, the "*difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 1994: 122, emphasis in the original) whereby the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal Law keeps its objects perpetually out of reach—teaching to transgress loosens the hold that this structuration has on us and reveals enjoyment as always "at hand" (Miller 1996: 426). The presence of that joy is not the logical consequence of the naïve belief in our capacity individually to emancipate ourselves but of the active yet painful destruction of the joys that we have learned collectively to desire in "life." The desire to transgress, to liberate difference from the Symbolic constraints of the order of the same, is a murderous desire that does not actually belong to the order of desire. It is, more adequately, the setting-in-motion of a death drive that seeks to kill life's joys so that one can learn the dance of social death, and through that dance, jo[y]in the liberation.

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