

Parenting as a Political Pedagogy, a Disobedient Critique

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Abstract

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Using Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and bell hooks' "Understanding Patriarchy," this essay examines the patriarchal family as a situation of oppression and suggests that if we address the parent/child relationship as an educative site with political implications, families/households can be transformed from situations of domination to situations of love. To understand parenting as a political pedagogy is to acknowledge the parent/child relationship as partly constitutive of each individual's foundational understandings of power, domination and love and to engage our daily lives as sites rich with contradictions and the corresponding potential for transformation. Parenting as a political pedagogy fosters a praxis that is a continual process of love/dialogue and action/reflection, serving as the foundation of a lifetime of living in process with others as subjects in a continuous transformation of reality. This project is an attempt to engage the imagination in pursuit of envisioning alternative forms of human association that can facilitate the transformative project of restructuring social hierarchies and creating a world in which it will be easier to love.

Introduction

What would it mean if we understood parenting to be an educative practice with political implications? How differently would we act in the most intimate of our personal relationships if we could see the family as the first site where children learn about power, domination and love? What principles could guide us in our desire to parent with practices that reflect our highest values for humanity and for the world? What would it look like to parent in situations of love?

I am a mother, a daughter, a sister, a lover, a worker. Throughout any given day, I experience a variety of positions of domination and subordination, a variety of situations in which I have the potential to reinforce, reinterpret or disrupt the status quo. Coming to understand the status quo as a complex web of systems of oppression and relationships of domination has led me to critically examine the power dynamics that structure my daily reality. A quick review of my daily experiences easily reveals that the relationship in my life that confers the most power upon me is my role as a mother in the parent/child relationship. Tasked with the daily care and co-creation of the world with these growing humans in the intimate closeness of the home, I feel an immense responsibility to teach them a way of being that will enable them to experience the fullest potential of their humanity, but when I reflect upon my parenting practices, I see a contradiction between the ideal ethic of love and my practices. Because I engage my children from an ethic of domination, I reinforce the status quo. Recognizing this dissonance between values and practices, it becomes imperative that I seek a method through which to undermine the dichotomy between action and reflection, to engage my role as a parent as a radical project through which I can prioritize the values that rightfully flow from my most intimate relationships, enabling my family to engage in a process of collective discovery through

which we can develop practices of being together that strive toward a realization of love as an ethical ideal.

This project is a part of my search for an alternative way of being in the world that encourages me to be intentional in my personal relationships, to check my potential to dominate in those relationships in which social structures bestow upon me a disproportionate amount of power, to co-create the world I want to live in with my children. It is an attempt to consciously incorporate my values into my everyday actions, and it is to do so with a recognition of the special role of the parent/child relationship as the space in which we first learn about power, domination and love. Facing the reality that I engage my children with an ethic of domination is painful, as it conjures the many experiences that have shaped my own understanding of love and defined it in ways that are deeply entangled with domination. Despite the inevitable difficulties of overcoming these understandings, this way of being, I have a responsibility to my children to work against the status quo. Because I am critical of a world guided by an ethic of domination, I choose to search for an alternative ethic through which to guide my actions. To engage this work as praxis is to admit my faults, to desire another way of being, to relinquish the dominator consciousness and to actively seek to live a life that is a direct expression of my values.

My critical consciousness motivates me to be critical of power dynamics in all situations, and personal reflections on my social position have led me to the understanding that my parenting practices do not always align with my professed values. Since recognizing that I rely on traditional parenting practices that reinforce an ethic of domination in parent/child interactions, I have been looking for systematic ways to mediate this power dynamic, for practical ways to parent that reinforce an ethic of love as opposed to an ethic of domination. I believe that the power constituting the parent/child relationship can be demystified, that

relationships can be built on love and that the pursuit of living lives as more fully human is a valuable ontological vocation. This project is an attempt to engage the imagination in pursuit of envisioning alternative forms of human association that can facilitate the transformative project of restructuring social hierarchies.

An analysis of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and bell hooks' "Understanding Patriarchy" reveals the relations occurring within the patriarchal family to be a specific situation of oppression. Where concern for humanization leads to an interrogation of material reality in search of understanding those situations that serve to maintain our dehumanization, the patriarchal family, as a persistent situation of domination, comes to the forefront as the first system of domination that humans encounter and are most likely to encounter on a daily basis, giving it a special credence in the construction of humans' ways of understanding our relationships with others and with the world. Once we understand patriarchy and its role in our collective dehumanization, we have the opportunity to explore the family as a site rich with contradictions and to grapple with these contradictions in ways that bring us new understandings and new ways of being. Through praxis, we can collectively work within our families to transform our everyday practices toward a realization of our fullest human potential.

Chapter 1: Paulo Freire

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire expresses concern for the extent to which our lives are guided by an ethic of domination. “I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of domination – which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved.”¹ Understanding that our means of interacting with one another is the result of our socialization in a society that is defined by domination, Freire seeks to achieve an understanding of another way of being, a way of being that furthers human liberation. Because our socialization/education can either be in the service of the status quo or serve as a vehicle of liberation, he advocates for the implementation of a pedagogy of the oppressed that must be implemented in order to cultivate critical consciousness and to achieve a praxis that encompasses a transformation of the material conditions that maintain the domination of our epoch, enabling humanization. Put simply, the goal is to be more fully human and to accept this becoming as a never-ending process that we have the power to help guide and shape through our relations with others and with the world.

Because of the centrality of the idea of becoming more fully human in Freire’s project, the pedagogy of the oppressed can also be called a quest for humanization, understood as an attempt to realize the origins of human oppression and to engage in a systematic attempt to overcome them. Freire equates this project of humanization with the pursuit of freedom. “Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.”² Freedom is thus the very process of becoming more fully human. To strive for humanization is to acknowledge the

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 103.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

reality that humanity is incomplete and that we have the ability to engage this incompleteness as a project that we have the power to shape and guide toward particular ends. To be free is to understand this striving for completion as an inescapable necessity in the co-construction and expression of our fullest humanity. This work is so central to our very understandings of ourselves as humans that Freire calls it an “ontological vocation.”³

“Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. ... Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness.”⁴ When we choose to live life in pursuit of becoming more fully human, when we strive to experience a full range of human emotions in genuine relations with others, we come face to face with the reality of our oppressive situations and learn to see our humanization as intimately connected to the material conditions in which we find ourselves. Always present in a particular historical moment with the opportunity to choose to live in pursuit of humanization or dehumanization, the incompleteness of humanity represents choices, possibilities. To engage with others and with the world as agents capable of living intentionally, our everyday lives are permeated by moments within which we have the option to either engage the human condition in furtherance of the struggle for humanization, “for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons”⁵ or in furtherance of our own dehumanization.

This quest for humanization, for freedom, this reason for being, requires that we achieve critical consciousness of those aspects of our realities that function to dehumanize us, to oppress

³ Ibid., 37.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵ Ibid., 44.

us. Freire calls this the project of coming to critical consciousness, or *conscientizacao*. “The term *conscientizacao* refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”⁶ It is intended to convey Freire’s understanding of humans in the world as agentic, as having the ability to adequately assess our material realities through dialogue with our communities, to think critically about the specific situations of oppression that define our lives and perpetuate our collective dehumanization and to co-create reality through our everyday interactions. Coming to critical consciousness is to understand our role in the creation of a world that better enables the realization of our fullest humanity. *Conscientizacao* requires that we come to recognize the contradictions between our practices and the values inherent in our daily lived realities as well as that we work collectively to actively transform our social realities in pursuit of liberation.

To recognize that humanity is incomplete is to acknowledge our lives as projects within which we can work with others to discern which aspects of our current historical realities are dehumanizing and to accept our roles in overcoming those ways of being that reinforce this “distortion of being more fully human.”⁷ For Freire, this *process of being*⁸ is called praxis and is deeply interconnected with the establishment and maintenance of critical consciousness. “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.”⁹ Engaging in praxis is a way of being that purposefully undermines the dichotomy of action/reflection, instead referencing a process of being with others and with the world in which we continually engage in reflection about our actions, ask ourselves if our practices (action) align with our values (reflection), allow these reflections to influence further action and

⁶ Ibid., translator’s note, 35.

⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁹ Ibid., 79.

to do so often. “[R]eflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection... Otherwise, action is pure activism.”¹⁰ Praxis implies a dialectical relationship between action and reflection that seeks constant transformation, understanding transformation as possible, necessary and inescapable. The enactment of praxis is an expression of critical consciousness that conveys a hope for the future and an understanding that our actions can alter reality, can transform society for the better. Praxis and critical consciousness are the processes of action and reflection that carry the potential for us to engage our incompleteness for the purposes of humanization. Before humans can begin the work of praxis required by critical consciousness, we must first come to realistically understand the oppressive nature of our situations.

Our submersion in oppressive realities and the corresponding human tendency toward fear act as obstacles preventing us from engaging in this project of humanization. It is important to distinguish here between the nature of oppressive situations and the ways that this fear manifests within the consciousness of the oppressors and the oppressed.

Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the “here and now,” which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation—which determines their perception of it—can they begin to move.¹¹

The oppressors and the oppressed exist within specific historical moments, the “here and now,”¹² each encompassing its own social, political and economic realities. The experiences that shape the identities and consciousness of the oppressors and the oppressed are defined by these situations and also provide the necessary content for the discovery of contradictions and the

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

¹² Ibid.

concrete actions that will be needed in the struggle toward freedom. These oppressive situations define the ways that oppressors and oppressed engage with one another and can be more easily discerned by examining the specifics of the fearful nature inherent in the submerged consciousness of the oppressors and the oppressed. It is through engaging with the reality of these moments that humans begin to alter their consciousness and learn to be critical of the oppressive nature of the situations in which they find themselves. “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.”¹³

The submerged consciousness of the oppressors and the oppressed is defined by the fear of freedom. “Fear of freedom, of which its possessor is not necessarily aware, makes him see ghosts. Such an individual is actually taking refuge in an attempt to seek security, which he or she prefers to the risks of liberty...”¹⁴ To be fearful of freedom is the condition of being unaware of the material conditions in which the oppressors and the oppressed find themselves. It is to be unable to recognize the contradictions that define their identities and their situations. Unaware, lacking critical consciousness, the oppressors and the oppressed have not yet discovered the potential for liberation that exists within their situations. Instead of recognizing the systems of domination that structure their material realities and define their possibilities in dehumanizing ways, they see the actions of individual others as competition, as threatening, as the source of their immediate ills. The security of the status quo is preferred to the struggle for liberation. For the oppressors, this manifests as false generosity and an inability to see the violence that they enact through their very ways of being. For the oppressed, to risk a transformation of the status quo is to risk one’s very survival. Fearful of change, both parties engage in practices that

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

reinforce dehumanizing ways of being instead of taking the necessary risks toward a realization of everyone's liberation.

The oppressor consciousness defines and constructs the dominant social apparatus, the social, political and economic structures that provide the parameters of what is considered possible. Deeply socialized into these structures, the oppressors cannot see the extent to which their desires for possession and control perpetuate their own dehumanization and maintain a situation of oppression for everyone. Preoccupied with what they have, what they can possess, from their perspective, everything around them exists merely for their domination. “The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time – everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal...”¹⁵ The imposition of the oppressor consciousness and way of being with the world requires the domination of others as things/objects through the presumption that the oppressors know what is best for everyone. By projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, they prescribe their own understandings instead, exerting authority in ways that attempt to stifle the emergence of critical consciousness. If the existence of the oppressed is to be productive toward the oppressors' ends, the behavior of the oppressed must be in accordance with the prescriptions of the oppressors. Other humans become something for the oppressors to inculcate into their own consciousness and way of being with the world. Hence, control of humanity by the oppressors is necessary for the maintenance of the oppressive situations that define the oppressors' consciousness, the status quo.

This means of interaction with others and with the world that is defined by subject/object relations between oppressors and all of the “things” they believe exist for their domination

¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

includes an insatiable desire for the acquisition of more things. “For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more – always more – even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of ‘haves.’”¹⁶ As possessors of the world, the oppressors are unable to see that their attempts to have more are an expression of their own dehumanization. As they acquire more and more, they engage in acts of charity toward the oppressed that serve to placate their own guilt without actually engaging in any action that would change the material conditions that create the situations of oppression in the first place. Engaging in these actions of false generosity are reflective of the oppressors’ inability to understand their actions as oppressive, having so thoroughly internalized the conditions within which they dehumanize and are themselves dehumanized.

As beneficiaries of a situation of oppression, the oppressors cannot perceive that if *having* is a condition of *being*, it is a necessary condition for all women and men. This is why their generosity is false. Humanity is a ‘thing,’ and they possess it as an exclusive right, as inherited property. To the oppressor consciousness, the humanization of ‘others,’ of the people, appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion.¹⁷

Providing charity without understanding, without taking the time to become conscious of the humanity of those in need, serves only as a mirage within which the oppressors can view themselves as amiable, further allowing them to justify their objectification of the oppressed, who are perceived as unable to do anything for themselves.

The oppressor consciousness shapes the interactions possible between humans and the world as possessive, controlling, objectifying and marked by relations of domination. The consciousness of the oppressed is constructed within these situations of oppression, making the very idea of advocating for their humanity and a change to their situations of oppression appear not as an act of freedom but as a risk. The risks facing the oppressed vary considerably

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58-59.

depending upon the material conditions in which they find themselves but could include a loss of income or reputation, a loss of a job, abandonment by one's loved ones, banishment from one's community or even death. Instead of taking these risks, the oppressed find comfort and security in the status quo, in the oppressive situations that have heretofore defined their reality. It is all that they know.

However, the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires. Moreover, their struggle for freedom threatens not only the oppressor, but also their own oppressed comrades who are fearful of still greater repression.¹⁸

The oppressed consciousness denies the possibility of a world in which people relate to each other outside of the parameters set by the oppressor. Even as they come to recognize the necessity of the struggle for freedom, they struggle with the extent to which their own thinking has been shaped by spending their entire lives submerged in situations of oppression. Whereas the fear of freedom requires that they operate to maintain the structures set in place by the oppressors, the oppressed have the responsibility of recognizing the duality present in their consciousness and overcoming the oppressor within. "The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized."¹⁹

If liberation is a process of humanization through which we struggle to see the systems of domination that serve to oppress us and work to transform them and if those occupying the positions of oppressor and oppressed are so thoroughly entrenched in dehumanizing, oppressive

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48.

practices that they are unable to see the world of oppression that they create and maintain, the reality of their oppressive situations must be revealed through a pedagogy of the oppressed, initiated by the oppressed. “As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.”²⁰ The experiences of the oppressed provide them with the perspective needed to come to critical consciousness and believe in the possibility of their freedom, providing them with access to a fuller understanding of what constitutes reality and the concomitant methods of humanization that can be beneficial to society as a whole. The responsibility falls to the oppressed to initiate a liberatory pedagogy and free everyone to the potential experience of lives lived as more fully human.

Only as they discover themselves to be ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible.²¹

Recognizing the oppressor consciousness within oneself and understanding the ways that this consciousness shapes material conditions is a painful experience for the oppressed. Understanding the ways that even those who find themselves in structurally subordinate positions in society act to perpetuate situations of oppression – the acts of “horizontal violence,”²² the “fatalistic attitudes,”²³ the practices that reinforce an ethic of domination in a variety of contexts – includes a new understanding of self that carries an enormous weight, likened here to a rebirth. While this new understanding of self in relation to others and the world is full of possibilities, it also includes a new perspective on one’s previous actions.

Humans, however, because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world—because they are conscious beings—exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Ibid., 48.

²² Ibid., 62.

²³ Ibid., 61.

of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the “limit-situations.” Once perceived by individuals as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality.²⁴

When humans work together to achieve an understanding of the specifics of their particular historical realities, they begin to emerge from a consciousness of submersion, learning instead to objectify reality, understand their role within it and perceive themselves as conscious actors existing within a situation of oppression. Coming to understand the present moment as representative of potential is the mark of an agentic, critical consciousness, revealing to people the specifics of the “limit-situations”²⁵ that they are learning to perceive in new ways. The contradictions between practices (actions) and values (reflection) become apparent, allowing the oppressed to engage in praxis, to distinguish between what they perceive to be limiting them and the freedom that is theirs to take.

To understand the pedagogy of the oppressed as necessary is to acknowledge the human condition as incomplete, to have faith that material conditions can be altered to produce situations other than that of domination and oppression and to actively work toward a transformation of these material conditions. For Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed is

a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 99.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 48.

A pedagogy of the oppressed is a method of engaging with others in a variety of settings that can be understood as educative in its attempt to bring about a new reality that alters the situation of the oppressors and the oppressed so as to enable a more fully human experience for all. The elevation of consciousness and the engagement in praxis required for this work become possible when the oppressed perceive their situations as possibilities for transformation, when they engage in the dialectical relationship between action and reflection in perpetuity in pursuit of freedom.

Situations of oppression can be overcome by employing the pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire uses educational concepts to elucidate the methods that he believes further the construction of the oppressor consciousness in situations of oppression and the preferred methods of his pedagogy, which would, contrarily, contribute to the people's coming to critical consciousness and engaging in the process of their own liberation. How can our relationships with others become that through which all parties seek to better understand reality, to engage in critical thinking and to reflect and take action upon the world in order to better enable the humanization of us all? To do so requires a relinquishing of the oppressor consciousness that seeks to possess and control and to renounce the oppressed consciousness which prefers the security of conformity to the risks of freedom, both of which must be replaced with a desire for life lived in the pursuit of mutual humanization. Freire thinks that the links between education and the larger social apparatus can begin to be disrupted, that contradictions can be revealed and critical consciousness achieved, by engaging critically with the methods that distinguish our interactions with one another, by shifting from the banking concept of education to the problem-posing concept of education.

Through an analysis of what Freire calls the banking concept of education, he outlines his perspective on the dehumanizing practices/effects of mainstream methods of interaction. He explores this education for dehumanization by detailing the ways in which education is used to suppress students' abilities to recognize their critical consciousness. In terms of practical application, the banking concept of education includes a number of practices that can be taken for granted within the public school system in the United States. "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing."²⁷ The assumption that knowledge transfers in educational settings are unidirectional (subject/object), the absence of student input on the content of the curriculum, the curriculum's corresponding lack of practical application to the students' lives, the idea that the teacher is a pure authority to whom the students will acquiesce and other common practices all reinforce a particular way of being. Within Freire's banking concept of education, knowledge is deposited into the students, who are responsible for unquestioningly internalizing and reinforcing it. Any potential connection to their material realities is suppressed through the practices of rote memorization. The resulting consciousness is invested in the necessity of complicity with the oppressive status quo.

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them."²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

Within this educational model, students are educated to acquiesce to the oppressor consciousness and serve the oppressors' interests. Equally abhorrent here is the consciousness that this educational method produces and the methods that are used to produce it.

Within this conceptual model, then, education serves as a tool of oppression in its intention to cultivate a submissive attitude in the oppressed. A good student knows her place, accepts purported axioms as fact, behaves within the confines set before her by those with authority, and her orientation toward the world is characterized by passivity, a deference to authority and a complete presumed lack of knowledge (an empty vessel waiting to be filled by those with knowledge). The extent to which a student obediently allows herself to become a "manageable being"²⁹ correlates directly to the ease with which the student will adapt herself to the social structures in which she finds herself, however dehumanizing.

And since people "receive" the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better "fit" for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.³⁰

The banking concept of education thus reflects the larger social reality, mirrors the "paternalistic social action apparatus,"³¹ in which a properly socialized member of the oppressed class is not situated so as to engage her imaginative potential, examine contradictions or make the conceptual connection between her patterns of interaction, her education and her expected social roles. The emphasis on what we have as constitutive of who we are, the need to passively fit into current social structures, the acceptance of authority and the hierarchical relationships that accompany it – all of these understandings are aligned with an acceptance of the oppressors'

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Ibid., 74.

role for the oppressed in the world. With the internalization of this consciousness, the oppressed accept their position as objects in the oppressors' world and join in their pursuit of having more, acquiring more and possessing more in order to define themselves.

Freire suggests replacing the banking concept of education with a problem-posing concept of education as the means to achieve a critical consciousness of the reality of one's concrete situation in the world. "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."³² Within the problem-posing educational concept, it becomes possible to critically interrogate reality and recognize contradictions between one's values and the values/practices of one's community, to question/criticize authority and to foster new ways of being in process with one another that better enable a full expression of humanity. In terms of practical application, "[s]tudents, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge."³³ Problem-posing education seeks to encourage the development of critical consciousness through this grappling with problems that are directly applicable to students' lives and includes a revision of the teacher/student relationship and the implementation of its preferred method, dialogue.

For Freire, an essential component of the project of humanization is this requirement that we interact with others in ways that value and respect their humanity, ways that promote our mutual humanization. If we are to overcome subject/object relations with others and with the world in order to achieve subject/subject relations, we must engage the first part of his pedagogy,

³² Ibid., 83.

³³ Ibid., 81.

which is to attempt to understand the reality of our oppressive situations and seek to change them. “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality.”³⁴ How we interact with others in our attempts to implement this humanizing pedagogy is of central concern because it is in the praxis that we find ourselves and our freedom.

If we value others as persons, our interactions with them will promote their quest to become more fully human. To engage with others in a way that promotes their freedom is to recognize their humanity, to assist/work beside them in their projects of coming to understand the historical situations in which they find themselves, to work in solidarity with them for the purpose of elevating consciousness, to nurture critical thinking and to love them from a place of humility and faith in humankind. Freire achieves this move to subject/subject relations through a revision of the teacher/student relationship. “To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation.”³⁵ Here, trust and conscious attention to power relations are required, for the parties involved in a subject/subject interaction do not wish to dominate one another. Instead, when we live our politics, when we allow our means and ends to align in practice, in praxis, we allow a vulnerability with others that respects their personhood and diminishes the hierarchical distinctions that structure all oppressive situations. In the educational setting, moving from teacher/student to teacher-student/students-teachers enables this move to subject/subject relations.

³⁴ Ibid., 84.

³⁵ Ibid., 75.

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side of* freedom, not *against* it.³⁶

Jointly responsible for the co-creation of knowledge, all involved parties share in the processes of naming reality and discovering contradictions, questioning and revising the role of authority, working to establish a synthesis between values and practices and establishing new ways of being in process with others that foster mutual humanization.

If the goal is to transform relations from that of teacher/student (subject/object) to a less hierarchical structure of teacher-student/students-teachers (subject/subject) and this transition requires respect for others as humans and trust in their abilities to think critically, as a process that occurs between subjects, the method of dialogue is the foundation for a lifetime of being in process with others as subjects. “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence.”³⁷ Dialogue, as a method of communication that enables people to become conscious of reality in ways that enable critical thinking and critical engagement with the world, is “an existential necessity,”³⁸ as it is through dialogue that we name the world, and it is through naming the world that we recognize our humanity. “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it.”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

³⁸ Ibid., 88.

³⁹ Ibid.

As an inherently relational process that seeks to balance power in the mutual process of enabling another to become more fully human, dialogue is the central method of Freire's problem-posing education. Inherent in its practice is a particular orientation toward interactions with others and with the world that emphasizes subject/subject relations, encourages critical engagement with reality and makes the space for collective engagement through respectful communication that enables the realization of critical consciousness and praxis in the collective co-construction of reality. This orientation toward the world is realized when we dialogue with others from a place of love, humility, faith, trust, hope and solidarity.

Dialogue requires humility in that it entails a willingness to accept the limits of our own knowledge and to work toward gracefully interacting with others through the inevitable moments of discomfort that the process of coming to understand the nature of reality, of oppressive situations, entails. With humility comes the ability to humbly accept our faults and our misunderstandings. "How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?"⁴⁰ Given the variability of interpretive experience, what the oppressors and the oppressed have always known to be reality can change when we acquire understandings of others' realities. Perhaps our interpretive lens has been limited by privilege, by marginalization, by the homogeneity of social reality or by the limited range of our previous experiences. When we engage in dialogue with others as subjects, we must be willing to face the limitations of our understanding, to accept the vulnerability and discomfort that is inherent in the method/process and to take seriously critique and conceptions of reality that exist in opposition/contrast to our current understandings.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting together, to learn more than they now know.⁴¹

Trusting others, having faith in the ability of all humans to work toward critical consciousness and being hopeful about our collective potential are all exercises in mutuality that are necessary for the realization of genuine dialogue. Trusting others' intentions to be genuine and in pursuit of everyone's humanization requires a critical perspective of the world that places optimism at its center and believes in the ability of people to achieve another way of being with one another and with the world. To have faith is to look to the future and believe in its possibilities, to be an idealist. "Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue; the 'dialogical man' believes in others even before he meets them face to face."⁴² Hope extends our trust and faith in others and is a component of this optimistic perspective toward the world. Typically the optimist begins in this space of hope, believes in humanity and in humans' abilities to collectively work toward a future that nourishes our humanization. The pedagogy of the oppressed requires such a hopeful approach to reality. As Freire acknowledges,

Some will regard my position vis-à-vis the problem of human liberation as purely idealistic, or may even consider discussion of ontological vocation, love, dialogue, hope, humility, and sympathy as so much reactionary "blah." Others will not (or will not wish to) accept my denunciation of a state of oppression that gratifies the oppressors. Accordingly, this admittedly tentative work is for radicals.⁴³

To accept the task of humanization is to believe that another reality is possible and to actively work toward its co-construction. Engaging in dialogue based on these necessary components requires the radical, the faithful, the hopeful, to work together for the purposes of transforming reality.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 90-91.

⁴³ Ibid., 37.

[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them.⁴⁴

The hopeful radical who comes to the people with an inherent trust in their abilities is enacting her role as an agent of change who is now ready to do the work of critical thought in community, in solidarity. “Hope is rooted in men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in communion with others.”⁴⁵ Hope is an existential orientation, then, that shapes our thinking in ways that are subtle yet powerful, delineating what we believe to be possible and requiring that we do this work in solidarity with others. To understand humanity as incomplete is to understand our growth as a process through which we can collectively pursue our humanization or remain complicit in our dehumanization. Without others and the world, the oppressors and the oppressed cannot learn to trust others, to engage in dialogue about reality, to think critically about how to achieve a world that better enables the humanization of all, to overcome the fear that has previously defined their consciousness.

Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.⁴⁶

To think critically in community about the reality of oppressive situations and to speak candidly about our perceptions so as to enable a fuller account of objective reality is the work of overcoming our oppression. This is the pedagogy of the oppressed, its praxis. It is dialogue in action regarding the here and now, undermining the engrained dichotomies between self/other,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 92.

self/world and thought/action, forgoing the potential risks in favor of freedom. “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.”⁴⁷ Embracing the active role implicit in critical thought and doing this work in solidarity with others is, then, the means to achieving a new way of being.

Love is the last major component Freire presents as constitutive of his problem-posing educational method. “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people.”⁴⁸ Without love, we cannot achieve dialogue. Love is, therefore, both chronologically prior to our engagement with dialogue, and it remains present throughout our dialogical encounters. In fact, Freire ties love to dialogue in ways that overcome the dualities of action/reflection, means/ends and naïve understandings of temporality. “Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.”⁴⁹ In order to engage in dialogue, as action, we must have established an orientation toward humanity that is grounded in love, through reflection. In the act of dialogue, which is at the same time an act of love itself, the duality between the means, dialogue/love, and our desired ends, a world in constant process toward humanization, dissolves. For Freire, love, as dialogue, is the means and the end. Love is a component of the dialogical method, it is the purpose of this method, and it is the method itself. Dialogue/love is both the method of problem-posing education and the perpetual process of humanization that we are to learn through the pedagogy of the oppressed. Its enactment encourages the continual development of both in their interactions with each other. Love enables dialogue, which further enables love and vice versa in perpetuity.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

“It [love] is thus necessarily the task of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated.”⁵⁰ Love can only be found within subject/subject relationships with others and with the world. Because the alternative, subject/object relations, implies objectification and control, it is representative of the oppressor consciousness and, as such, disallows genuine dialogue, which is love, implying instead the pathology of love. “Oppression – overwhelming control – is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life.”⁵¹ Sadism, masochism, necrophilia, this is the pathology of love. To find pleasure in the pain of another (oppressor consciousness), to find pleasure in one’s own pain (oppressed consciousness), to be contented with a life that is not lived to its fullest possible human potential, is to be complacent with a life lived entirely within oppressive situations. Whereas a necrophilic life is content, perhaps even finds pleasure, in the denial of life, the pathology of love is to deny the possibility of freedom. If love cannot exist as a relation of domination and love and dialogue so deeply implicate one another, to fail to communicate with another from the perspective of subject/subject relations or without any of the above referenced components – humility, faith, trust, hope, critical thinking, solidarity, love – is to engage in antialogue, or a form of domination.

In situations of oppression in which the voices of the oppressed are not heard and the limits of their acceptable actions are prescribed by the oppressors, genuine communication is not possible. The oppressors avoid dialogue with the oppressed, indeed negate its very possibility, instead engaging in actions of antialogue, including conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion. Freire details the many ways that the antialogue engages in economic

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

and cultural conquest of the oppressed as a means of both initiating and maintaining power and control over them. “In sum, there is no oppressive reality which is not at the same time necessarily antialogical, just as there is no antialogue in which the oppressors do not untiringly dedicate themselves to the constant conquest of the oppressed.”⁵² The paternalistic exercise of seeking to conquer others through various methods entails perpetuating a myth of the natural inferiority of the oppressed, paying attention to micro issues as a way to distract from analyses of the totality, engaging in acts of false generosity in order to claim to be benevolent and on the side of the oppressed, utilizing multiple forms of manipulation intended to prevent critical thinking and employing the practices of cultural invasion which intend to keep people from themselves and their histories in favor of internalizing the oppressors’ perspective of the world.

Love is presented as the possible alternative consciousness to which we can strive in opposition to the submerged consciousness of fear that defines oppressive situations and relations of antialogue. “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical.”⁵³ It is love that encourages people to enact a revolutionary praxis in pursuit of humanization. It is love that leads the radical to desire another way of being that can enable the realization of our collective freedom. Love, as such, is courageous; it cannot be fearful. As commitment to others, love guides the way in this project of collective humanization.

I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love... What, indeed, is the

⁵² Ibid., 141.

⁵³ Ibid., 89.

deeper motive which moves individuals to become revolutionaries, but the dehumanization of people? The distortion imposed on the word “love” by the capitalist world cannot prevent the revolution from being essentially loving in character, nor can it prevent the revolutionaries from affirming their love of life.⁵⁴

Love is the orientation toward the world that results from an acknowledgement of our collective immersion in situations of oppression. Through a recognition of the dehumanizing nature of our situations, we find the ability to overcome our fear and engage our incompleteness because we desire a world that enables its opposite, that of love. If the process of humanization is encapsulated in our collective striving to experience a full range of human emotions in genuine relations with others, learning to engage in dialogue is the foundation of a lifetime of living in process with others as subjects in a continuous transformation of reality. By centering love/dialogue as method, as the paradigm through which we engage with others and with the world, as means and end, in the here and now, we center the continuous process of engaging critical consciousness and praxis, allowing our lives to be living expressions of our desire for a more fully human life.

If situations of oppression are to be overcome through the pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire provides an alternative theme around which to build a liberated society, and this theme is love. The achievement of this new reality is never-ending, always in process, encompassed by the means as much as the intentional move toward its goal. In the preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes, “From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love.”⁵⁵ This introductory quote expresses three specific components of Freire’s project. First, he seeks to relate to all humans as subjects, as persons in their own right in whom he trusts

⁵⁴ Ibid., footnote 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

and has faith. This requires a shift in the ways that we relate to others, moving from subject/object to subject/subject relations. Second, he lists three components of his pedagogical method of dialogue, trust, faith and love. His emphasis on these components highlights the need to understand the important role of dialogue in his pedagogy, as well as to understand his project as a process that is always capable of being altered, always in the process of becoming. Third, he tells us his aim (which is also a component of his method), a world in which it will be easier to love. For Freire, love is the means and the end, the process and the goal. Love is an essential component of his method, a requirement in the liberatory transformation of human relationships, a part of this never-ending process, and it is also the ideal ethic toward which we should strive.

Situations of love are possible when we purposefully engage others and the world through practices of love as guided by an ideal ethic of love. The following passage outlines the need for this to occur in community between subjects in pursuit of the transformation of reality.

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture. If what characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these “beings for another.” The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor – when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.⁵⁶

In defiance of the situations in which the oppressors and the oppressed have been submerged, of the fear that has defined their consciousness and way of being, it is imperative that they all take the necessary steps to move beyond what they have known into the possibilities that are revealed when they risk an act of love.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49-50.

As a result of the dangerous, hard work of the oppressed to come to understand the material conditions of their reality and engage their critical consciousness in praxis for the pursuit of a life lived in situations of love, the oppressors also become aware of the reality of their oppressive situations and the role of their oppressive consciousness in the dehumanization of all. Solidarity is achieved, and the implication is that “the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom.”⁵⁷ Although in practice, the concept of praxis requires that the work of humanization for all be understood as a never-ending process of always engaging in collective reflection and action toward the realization of freedom, the assumption is that in a liberated society, the pedagogy of the oppressed has helped to overcome the distinction between oppressors and oppressed, instead bringing about the existence of a new being, the “man in process of liberation.”⁵⁸ In Freire’s post-revolutionary society, all humans are humans in pursuit of their continued humanization, all equally in process.

To presume a relationship among humans that is represented by a state of equality among them is to ignore the reality of the continued existence of asymmetrical power relations. Indeed, even in Freire’s liberated society, we retain positions of authority and relations of asymmetrical power within the family between parents and children. An analysis of situations of oppression within the family extends Freire’s understanding of what is necessary in order to realize our fullest potential as humans. By calling attention to the omission of the particulars of asymmetrical, interpersonal power in the parent/child relationship, it becomes possible to name the particular situations of domination that comprise the daily, lived realities of these relationships. It is through the naming that we come to critical consciousness about the role of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 56.

these relationships in maintaining situations of oppression, enabling a transformative praxis that can go a step further and encompass the potential for liberatory healing in our most intimate relationships.

Chapter 2: bell hooks

In a six-page zine entitled “Understanding Patriarchy,” bell hooks aptly characterizes relations of domination within the patriarchal family. Insisting upon the importance of understanding patriarchy, hooks identifies it as a specific system of domination that structures relations of domination within the patriarchal family, distinguishing between its political and psychological manifestations and acknowledging the specific ways that it manifests as practices of domination. In addition, hooks highlights the ways that patriarchy both affects all people and is perpetuated by all people, no matter their gender, keeping us entrenched in ways of relating to one another that are dysfunctional and perverse.

Throughout this text, hooks weaves her personal experiences being dominated as a child with her analysis. Using her own narrative, she pulls out certain themes that she believes broadly characterize relations within the patriarchal family and represent its central role in the perpetuation of relations of domination more broadly. This includes the socialization of children into gendered behavior roles, corresponding gendered expectations guiding appropriate emotional expressions, explicit physical violence, blind obedience and a culture of silence regarding the realities of our family situations. According to hooks, it is within the patriarchal family that children are socialized into a paradigm of human relations based on a dominator model of interaction and, as a result, are unable to enter into personal relationships in ways that allow for experiences of true intimacy and genuine wholeness. In addition to children’s socialization into psychological patriarchy as a means of maintaining multiple systems of domination, hooks attends to the ways that patriarchy harms all people, including men and boys, and the ways that women, as well as men, engage in patriarchal behavior and otherwise support

the perpetuation of patriarchal rule, in order to highlight a feminist politics that seeks to liberate people of all genders.

As the title of her zine implies, we cannot engage in a sustained critique of patriarchy or seek alternative ways of being with others without first understanding what patriarchy is.

“Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.”⁵⁹ hooks purposefully references patriarchy in conjunction with a number of adjectives which refer to other systems of domination that jointly structure our daily realities, specifically as “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” in order “to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation’s politics.”⁶⁰ Further, she quotes John Bradshaw’s definition of patriarchy as “‘a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family in both domestic and religious functions’. Patriarchy is characterized by male domination and power.”⁶¹

Even though it is intertwined with all other systems of domination, for hooks, patriarchy is the primary system of domination that structures our daily experiences and shapes our consciousness to be complicit in relations of domination and subordination. Under the rule of patriarchy, which is reinforced in a variety of social institutions, including “schools, courthouses, clubs, sports arenas, as well as churches,”⁶² we understand social expectations of our behavior to be aligned with the models of femininity and masculinity set before us as natural and ideal. Patriarchy is of primary concern for hooks because its presence in children’s lives marks it as the

⁵⁹ bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy.” (No Borders: Louisville’s Radical Lending Library), 1.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3.

⁶² Ibid., 1.

first system of domination that humans encounter, making it chronologically prior to, and therefore foundational, to all other systems of domination.

Of these systems the one that we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles.⁶³

hooks distinguishes between patriarchy as the political system which guides our overall cultural values and the internalization of patriarchal norms that is the result of a successful gendered socialization, which she calls psychological patriarchy.

Psychological patriarchy is a “dance of contempt,” a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation. It is the unacknowledged paradigm of relationships that has suffused Western civilization generation after generation, deforming both sexes, and destroying the passionate bond between them.⁶⁴

Psychological patriarchy describes the underlying consciousness that defines and confines the social scripts within which we engage with others. Through its presumption as the natural order of things, we are unable to see the extent to which patriarchy shapes and limits our abilities to achieve true intimacy and passionate bonds with others. Patriarchy, then, has explicitly political and psychological manifestations that support and reinforce each other within a paradigm of domination.

hooks argues that most humans’ first experience with systems of domination is their patriarchal socialization into institutional gender roles. Part of this process includes the teaching, learning and enforcing of rigid, stereotypical gender roles within the patriarchal family, including the socially acceptable emotional dispositions associated with femininity and masculinity. For girls, this generally includes learning “to serve, to be weak, to be free from the burden of

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

thinking, to caretake and nurture others,”⁶⁵ to be gentle and passive, to openly express certain feelings and to actively suppress others, such as aggression and rage. For boys, this includes learning “to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategize, and plan; and to refuse to caretake or nurture others,”⁶⁶ to be aggressive – even violent – and to suppress the expression of all other emotions. According to hooks, primary models for expected gender performance are those adults with whom children spend their earliest formative moments.

Because a boy’s successful socialization into gender roles includes a suppression of emotional expression, hooks spends considerable time exploring how patriarchal expectations of boys’ behavior causes them pain by cutting them off from this essential component of human wholeness. These boys grow up to be men who are unable to connect to a full range of human emotions, dispelling the notion that men find happiness as benefactors of a patriarchal system that confers dominance and power upon them.

Patriarchy as a system has denied males access to full emotional well-being, which is not the same as feeling rewarded, successful, or powerful because of one’s capacity to assert control over others. To truly address male pain and male crisis we must as a nation be willing expose the harsh reality that patriarchy has damaged men in the past and continues to damage them in the present. If patriarchy were rewarding, the overwhelming dissatisfaction that most men feel in their work lives ... would not exist.⁶⁷

This intentional suppression of certain emotions and the encouragement of others helps us to see the link between the practices of patriarchal families and the patriarchal nation in their mutual “insistence on violence as a means of social control.”⁶⁸ While hooks focuses on the extent to which we “indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy ... [by forcing] them to feel pain and to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

deny their feelings,”⁶⁹ she also uses her brother’s gendered socialization as an example of the link between this expectation of masculine behavior and the means/ends of the nation state.

When my brother responded with rage at being denied a toy, he was taught as a boy in a patriarchal household that his ability to express rage was good but that he had to learn the best setting to unleash his hostility. It was not good for him to use his rage to oppose the wishes of his parents, but later, when he grew up, he was taught that rage was permitted and that allowing rage to provoke him to violence would help him protect home and nation.⁷⁰

The socialization that tells boys not to cry, to man up, to suppress their desires to express or act on any feelings other than rage and aggression is intimately tied to gendered expectations of male behavior across domains. To protect, to be willing to engage in violence, to expect to engage in struggles of domination with others, all of this has been crafted into a general social understanding of men as inherently violent and aggressive. Understanding the potential political implications of this behavioral orientation that men and boys are expected to develop toward the world helps to disrupt the notion that patriarchy is a unidirectional system of relating in which men are always the dominators and women always the dominated. This serves as an important opportunity to understand the complexities of patriarchy and the ways that it limits everyone’s ability to engage in relations of true intimacy by cutting men off from significant portions of themselves, by forcing them to relate to themselves and others in ways that are vastly circumscribed.

In some situations, to fail to properly perform one’s gender is to risk the physical violence that often serves to remind all children of their place in the patriarchal family hierarchy. To illustrate, hooks recounts personal childhood experiences that served as her indoctrination into the acceptance of patriarchal norms. Being subjected to physical violence for failing to

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1.

conform to her father's expectations of her gendered expressions (being too aggressive while playing marbles with her brother) served as a spectacle, as an educative moment for the entire family.

The recollection of this brutal whipping of a little-girl daughter by a big strong man, served as more than just a reminder to me of my gendered place, it was a reminder to everyone watching/remembering, to all my siblings, male and female, and to our grown-woman mother that our patriarchal father was the ruler in our household. We were to remember that if we did not obey his rules, we would be punished, punished even unto death. This is the way we were experientially schooled in the art of patriarchy.⁷¹

This frequent, collective retelling of a moment of violence acted as a reminder to all that conformity to patriarchal rule was not optional and that any disobedience to this rule would be swiftly met with a violent response. Something as simple as acting outside of her expected gendered expression was enough to incite hooks' father to an act of violence, teaching everyone that they were to play their assigned role in the patriarchal family or else risk reprimand by way of physical violence. For hooks, the private space of the family was not a place of refuge, of care and comfort; to the contrary, her family was a central site of actual and potential abuse, within which hooks and her siblings learned to be obedient to patriarchal rule and to unquestioningly accept the use of violence to maintain this order. They learned that no one is safe from the enactment of violence that is sure to follow any action that attempts to disrupt patriarchal rule. This lesson included the complicity and silence of all other members of her family.

hooks recalls the complicity of her mother's response after this act of violence and uses this example to illustrate one of the ways that women support patriarchal ways of being within certain family situations, further enabling the indoctrination of children into a forced acceptance of patriarchal rule as the natural order.

⁷¹ Ibid., 2.

Mama came into the bedroom to soothe the pain, telling me in her soft southern voice, “I tried to warn you. You need to accept that you are just a little girl and little girls can’t do what boys do.” In service to patriarchy her task was to reinforce that Dad had done the right thing by, putting me in my place, by restoring the natural social order.⁷²

hooks writes extensively about the idea that patriarchal forms of human relations are perpetuated by women as well as men, particularly within parent/child relationships. Despite the fact that the benefits of patriarchy fall disproportionately to men, patriarchy is not a system of domination that is taught and perpetuated only by men. “Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers.”⁷³ Women in our society are most likely to be primary, and often sole, caregivers of children, and contrary to gendered expectations that women caretaker and nurture, where a male presence is perceived to be lacking, mothers and other caregivers often feel the need to compensate for the lack of a patriarchal male presence by modeling those gendered expectations associated with fathers, including but not limited to disciplinary expressions of domination, social power and authority.

[M]any female-headed households endorse and promote patriarchal thinking with far greater passion than two-parent households. Because they do not have an experiential reality to challenge false fantasies of gender roles, women in such households are far more likely to idealize the patriarchal male role and patriarchal men than are women who live with patriarchal men every day.⁷⁴

This maternal complicity in the generational transfer of problematic power dynamics highlights the dominator model of interaction that patriarchy reinforces, while also disrupting the common understanding that feminist critiques of patriarchy are always only critiques of male behavior as the sole perpetrators of domination.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

The numerous ways through which children are taught to accept hierarchical forms of relating to others within relations of domination are ingrained in our very understandings of ourselves as humans. These early and consistent experiences with physical and psychological violence within the patriarchal family prepare us for a lifetime of acclimation to expected gendered expressions and provide us with the knowledge that to fail to comply will be accompanied by a barrage of potential risks to our safety.

But the most common forms of patriarchal violence are those that take place in the home between patriarchal parents and children. The point of such violence is usually to reinforce a dominator model, in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission.⁷⁵

The desire to dominate, the lust for power over others, parallels the dominator model at the heart of all systems of domination and is taught to children as natural within specific familial situations. Given the general idea that parental domination of children, including physical abuse, is a widespread phenomenon that crosses many racial, gendered and class boundaries, hooks' argument is meant to reinforce the notion that "[t]here is nothing unique or even exceptional about this experience. Listen to the voices of wounded grown children raised in patriarchal homes and you will hear different versions with the same underlying theme, the use of violence to reinforce our indoctrination and acceptance of patriarchy."⁷⁶

By choosing to focus on the patriarchal family, hooks is naming it as an origin point of oppression within which we all experience our formative understandings of relationships as existing within a paradigm of domination. For hooks, patriarchy shapes the family to be a place where children acquire the understanding that hierarchy is necessary, that all relations consist of a person dominating and a person being dominated. Because these understandings permeate

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2.

children's lives, they come to accept this notion as an axiom and become comfortable applying it to a variety of other personal relationships, perpetuating the patriarchal cycle of violence that is, for many, implicit in family life.

Boys brutalized and victimized by patriarchy more often than not become patriarchal, embodying the abusive patriarchal masculinity that they once clearly recognized as evil. Few men brutally abused as boys in the name of patriarchal maleness courageously resist the brainwashing and remain true to themselves. Most males conform to patriarchy in one way or another.⁷⁷

In addition to this direct reference to the effects of patriarchy on boys and men, many girls also internalize a patriarchal consciousness in one way or another, whether it is through the acceptance of their gendered roles as passive nurturers, having aspirations to the power and esteem they see bestowed upon the men/boys around them, their own willingness to engage explicitly with others as dominators and/or the myriad ways that women accept their place by otherwise reinforcing the legitimacy of patriarchal rule.

Perpetuating the patriarchal cycle of violence requires that we all learn a number of means of avoiding direct engagement with the systems of domination that define our existence, and hooks specifically examines the role of blind obedience in the construction of the properly socialized child and how the consciousness of this child leads to two specific means of avoidance in adults, silence and laughter. hooks draws on the insights of John Bradshaw in order to examine the ways that patriarchy enforces a particular consciousness, or way of being with others, that prevents critical engagement with systems of domination. "Describing the most damaging of these rules, Bradshaw lists 'blind obedience – the foundation upon which patriarchy stands; the repression of all emotions except fear; the destruction of individual willpower; and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

the repression of thinking whenever it departs from the authority figure's way of thinking.”⁷⁸

Blind obedience in this context refers to a passive, submissive acceptance of authority and the dominator model of being with others. Where children are expected not to question, to critique or even to think outside of the confines that are set for them by their parents, their way of being becomes defined by the world that their parents set before them, to which they are expected to adapt with blind obedience. To question, to express criticism or concern, is to defiantly interrupt behavioral expectations that children do what they are told, that they know their place and act accordingly in the presumably natural patriarchal order. The goal of blind obedience is the creation of a consciousness that passively accepts this subordinate position of the child as a necessary complement to the dominance of the parents. To refuse to acclimate to this way of being is to risk the physical and/or psychological violence that accompanies a failure to conform to gendered behavioral expressions, although the expectation of blind obedience applies to all children, no matter their gender. The resulting consciousness lacks the ability/desire to question authority, generally, instead passively accepting the ways of the world as they are told to do so.

The consciousness established through the expectation of blind obedience leads directly into an understanding of the informal social expectation of silence regarding matters of family and home life. If someone has properly absorbed the necessity for blind obedience to authority that is a part of children's socialization in the patriarchal family, speaking out against perceived injustice becomes impossible. hooks' personal experience with physical violence as a child provides one example of this rule through her siblings' silent complicity in her “brutal whipping.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

Keeping males and females from telling the truth about what happens to them in families is one way patriarchal culture is maintained. A great majority of individuals enforce an unspoken rule in the culture as a whole that demands we keep the secrets of patriarchy, thereby protecting the rule of the father. This rule of silence is upheld when the culture refuses everyone easy access even to the word “patriarchy.” Most children do not learn what to call this system of institutionalized gender roles, so rarely do we name it in everyday speech. This silence promotes denial. And how can we organize to challenge and change a system that cannot be named?⁸⁰

Failing to talk with others about what we experience in spaces that are presumed to be private and free from public scrutiny is one way that those who experience domination prevent themselves from seeing their situations as linked to a larger system of domination. We lack the ability to make the connection to the many parallels between the specifics of our personal relationships and those of others when we allow the potential embarrassment and humiliation we could experience – or the physical and/or psychological harm that we could suffer as a result of speaking up – deter us from engaging our communities on the topics that affect us all at an intimate, everyday level.

In addition to the taboo against discussing the intimate and often perverse ways of relating that we experience within our families of origin, hooks connects the expectation of silence in these private spaces to a larger cultural silence surrounding the word patriarchy itself. When she uses the phrase “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” she notes that she often incites laughter in her audience, and she interprets this laughter to be an expression of discomfort with her desire to actually name our nation’s political system and encourage a critique of it. This laughter is a means of avoidance for those who are uncomfortable naming the systems that are responsible for their dehumanization.

No one has ever explained why accurately naming this system is funny. The laughter is itself a weapon of patriarchal terrorism. It functions as a disclaimer, discounting the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 3.

significance of what is being named. It suggests that the words themselves are problematic and not the system they describe. I interpret this laughter as the audience's way of showing discomfort with being asked to ally themselves with an antipatriarchal disobedient critique. This laughter reminds me that if I dare to challenge patriarchy openly, I risk not being taken seriously.⁸¹

Through her experiences openly and consistently encouraging a critique of patriarchy in public spaces, hooks has learned that this particular challenge to authority makes many people uncomfortable, and she interprets laughter as one expression on which people rely in order to disqualify her critique. Engaging in these means of avoidance, silence and laughter, when encouraged to critique patriarchy in our personal and public lives allows people to eschew the possibility that they come to critically understand the interlocking systems of domination that structure their world.

Throughout this text, hooks attempts to demystify and encourage critical thinking about the existence of patriarchy as a system that defines and constrains the limits within which we live. When such a project of demystification is applied to the family, an institution that is understood to be a deeply naturalized way of organizing life and that carries with it a myriad of deeply imbedded religious, cultural, historical and political meanings about how we understand our purpose and identity, it faces a particularly steep wall of denial, disbelief and dismissal, inevitably accompanied by various methods of avoidance. Enduring the laughter, breaking the silence about her own personal experiences and talking openly about how she perceives patriarchy to have influenced our nation's politics as well as her personal relationships are all pieces of hooks' purposeful methodology, as she sees silence around these issues as serving to maintain the dichotomy between the public and private spheres, preventing people from coming together to discuss the many ways that patriarchy permeates our lives.

⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

Is it possible that we refuse these conversations and nervously laugh off the idea that we take seriously the extent to which patriarchy defines our lives because we are fearful of what we may discover? To what extent does fear constitute our collective unconscious and guide our behavior, preventing us from seriously engaging each other on the topic of patriarchy? Just as hooks quotes John Bradshaw on the acceptable emotional expression of fear in relations structured by patriarchy, she also references fear when she discusses people's inability/refusal to acknowledge the existence of patriarchy in the first place. "Citizens in this nation fear challenging patriarchy even as they lack overt awareness that they are fearful, so deeply embedded in our collective unconscious are the rules of patriarchy."⁸² hooks is suggesting that we acknowledge the existence of a collective unconscious ruled by fear because to do so would be to recognize the possibility that we bring this understanding to the level of the conscious. To be conscious of our fear might enable a collective overcoming that would allow us to openly discuss patriarchy as a system of domination ruling our lives and bring us together to engage in collective discussions about ways that we might overcome its all-encompassing grip on our lives.

If we were to face our fears and deal with the reality that patriarchy shapes our lives, to what alternative would we turn and to what ends? There are a couple of places in this text where hooks suggests what an alternative way of being could look like. In her discussion of psychological patriarchy, she says that patriarchy is "a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy" and destroys "the passionate bond" that is possible between humans.⁸³ Elsewhere in her discussion, she states that to be whole is "to be givers and sustainers of life ... [to be] reliable and even benevolent caretakers and providers."⁸⁴ It is clear that hooks believes in the

⁸² Ibid., 4-5.

⁸³ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

possibility of a different way of being. The alternative toward which we should strive is that of genuine human wholeness, which is an expression of the desire to relate to others from a place of true intimacy, to pursue the potential that exists within passionate bonds and to place our highest value on our human abilities to give and nurture life. When we understand what patriarchy is, when we collectively engage in critical thought about its role in our lives, we have the potential to awaken from our collective unconscious of fear and to allow for the possibility that our world can be transformed in pursuit of other ways of being.

hooks envisions a transformative feminist politics capable of achieving this goal of realizing another way of being, of prioritizing the actualization of human wholeness. Through her attention to the extent to which patriarchy affects all humans, the specific effects of patriarchy on boys and men and the role of women in perpetuating patriarchal rule, hooks is arguing for a feminist politics that explicitly addresses male pain and that calls on everyone to work together to overcome the dominator model of human relations. “It is no accident that feminists began to use the word ‘patriarchy’ to replace the more commonly used ‘male chauvinism’ and ‘sexism.’ These courageous voices wanted men and women to become more aware of the way patriarchy affects us all.”⁸⁵ To fail to account for the ways that patriarchy harms men and boys is to be complicit in a political project that does not attend to the underlying desire for power that structures all of our relationships, the roles of all parties involved in the perpetuation of ways of being that deny the fullest possible expressions of our humanity and the lack of knowledge regarding alternative practices and ways of being with others.

hooks’ call to understand patriarchy is addressed to everyone and is explicitly framed so as to be appealing to men. “The crisis facing men is not the crisis of masculinity, it is the crisis of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

patriarchal masculinity. Until we make this distinction clear, men will continue to fear that any critique of patriarchy represents a threat.”⁸⁶ Instead, we must come to understand that we have all been schooled in the rules of patriarchy. It is embedded in our very consciousness, and it shapes our everyday lives in ways that limit our potential. “To end male pain, to respond effectively to male crisis, we have to name the problem. We have to both acknowledge that the problem is patriarchy and work to end patriarchy.”⁸⁷ hooks wants wholeness for men through a feminist politics that acknowledges the complexity of the dominator consciousness and the potential of all humans to engage with one another outside of the paradigm of the dominator model. She wants us to believe that another way of being is possible and that it is everyone’s responsibility to bring this alternative into being. “If men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. We must all change.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 3: The Patriarchal Family as a Situation of Oppression

Thus far, my references to the family have encompassed only the patriarchal family and have not addressed the constitutive parts of these families other than the presumption of parents and children. Definitions of family are historically, culturally and geographically specific and as such have changed over time to accommodate particular social realities. The only thing that has remained constant in definitions of the family is a general lack of consensus. Legal definitions often exist at odds with actual social practices and lived realities; for example, the U.S. federal government's refusal to acknowledge familial arrangements that do not fit the normative structure set forth in its laws and policies serves to further dehumanize marginalized communities. While I acknowledge that contemporary systems of domination define what is possible within our families and constrain our abilities to co-construct households that do not fit the contemporary normative model, it is important to note that any reference to the "family" without further clarification can be interpreted as a supposedly neutral, heteronormative, white, middle class family and, therefore, further marginalize a number of family forms that do not have the same social acceptance.

Families/households existing in an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal society are subject to the constraints of these interlocking political systems, further complicating and enhancing their experiences with practices of dehumanization. As families/households continue to take on new forms, come together to nurture one another in a variety of settings and struggle for legal recognition, it is important to distinguish between the patriarchal family as a situation of oppression and families/households, more generally, that can be constituted by a number of relations and agreements. The patriarchal family can be present in a variety of these

family forms, just as the parties present in these various possible family forms can attempt to actively overcome the social imposition of patriarchal practices within their families/households.

The patriarchal family, as set forth by hooks, is a specific manifestation of situations of oppression, as set forth by Freire. For Freire, situations of oppression are constituted by practices of dehumanization and a submerged consciousness motivated by fear that is unable to see the structures of oppression that define everyday lived realities. For hooks, the patriarchal family is shaped by relations of domination and supported by a consciousness of fear and silence. In both texts, the maintenance of this consciousness is based on methods of interaction defined by subject/object relations and deference to authority. Where the teacher/student relationship functions to establish a consciousness of docility in students, the expectation of blind obedience in the patriarchal family serves the same purpose in children. As a practice of dehumanization, patriarchal relations within the family deny the expression of our fullest potential as humans. Through its insistence that humans relate to one another in hierarchical relationships that confer dominance to one party and subordination to another, adopt gendered behavioral and emotional expressions and acquiesce to the expectation of a submissive behavioral orientation, the patriarchal family creates and sustains dehumanizing relationships that mirror and feed the oppressive structures of society, preparing children for a life of complicity with the oppressive status quo.

By assigning the role of dominator (oppressor) to parents and the role of dominated (oppressed) to children through daily reoccurring situations of domination, the patriarchal family is a specific situation of oppression made in the image of the dominator consciousness. Both the dominators (parents) and the dominated (children) collude in the maintenance of the patriarchal family, lacking the critical impetus to question their everyday realities and to see the

contradictions between their practices and the possibility of another way of being that promotes everyone's fullest human potential. Neither parents nor children are aware of the oppressive nature of their situations. All parties involved have a submerged consciousness and avoid direct engagement with patriarchy, as a system of domination, through means of avoidance such as laughter and silence because they are fearful of freedom. Within the parent/child relationship, the parent becomes a dominator creating the world for both parents and children as a reflection of the dominator model of interaction. The parent defines/confines the child's perceived possibilities through an active enforcement of the world through the dominator consciousness. Deeply socialized into the patriarchal family structure, parents/dominators are unable to see that the ways of interacting being enforced are perpetuating their own dehumanization and maintaining a situation of domination for the entire family. Just as the oppressor consciousness defines and constructs the dominant social apparatus in situations of oppression – the social, political and economic structures that determine what is considered possible – parents hold an awesome power to create the world for their children, to educate them into contemporary social norms and behavioral expectations in their own image.

The specific characteristics of the submerged consciousness within the patriarchal family manifest differently depending upon the position of the party within the situation. For parents, the dominator consciousness manifests through the very desire to dominate, the expectation that children are socialized into gendered expressions of behavior and the enactment of physical and psychological violence upon children when they fail to properly acclimate themselves to the parent's way of being. Understanding children to be objects of their control, parents are often unaware of the violence that they initiate by forcing children to accept the dominator model of human interaction. hooks pays particular attention to the parental directives that socialize

children into gendered expectations guiding appropriate emotional expressions, resulting in a stunted emotional maturity in boys and men, disallowing them socially acceptable access to a full range of human emotions and preventing their ability to engage with others in ways that are based on true intimacy.

For children, the dominated consciousness adheres to the status quo as a project of mere survival. Understanding that a failure to conform to parents' expectations often carries the potential for physical and psychological violence, children eagerly fulfill parental directives in order to avoid sanction. Presented to them as natural, relations of domination and subordination based on gendered behavioral expectations are the only option of interaction available to them. Because the means of interaction with others and with the world that the parents construct is based on subject/object relations and occurs within situations of domination, the child's consciousness understands the patriarchal family to be the only possibility. To engage the imagination in pursuit of other ways of being, to even dream that relations could be defined by anything other than domination, is suppressed by a lack of knowledge regarding the material reality that defines their lives and the comfort and security that accompanies the status quo. Even in moments when children intuitively understand the oppressive nature of their situations, they struggle with the extent to which their own thinking has been shaped by spending their entire lives submerged in situations of domination. Because the construction of their consciousness is rooted in blind obedience, children lack the ability to address the patriarchal family as a site of dehumanization.

The creation of a docile consciousness in children is an essential part of maintaining patriarchal families. In Freire's analysis of the banking concept of education, the creation of a docile consciousness in the oppressed is a dehumanizing practice that is employed with the

express purpose of suppressing students' abilities to recognize their critical consciousness. The relations between teachers and students are based on the subject/object model, and the methods employed in this concept are antidialogical, emphasizing unidirectional transfers of knowledge based on the assumption of students' ignorance and deference to authority, resulting in a consciousness that is invested in the necessity of complicity with the oppressive status quo. In the banking concept of education, "good" students are passive, adaptable, submissive, manageable beings who accept their place within a world defined by the confines of the oppressor consciousness. The resulting consciousness enables these students to better fit into the social structures in which they find themselves, however dehumanizing.

Similarly, within the educative encounters that occur daily between parents and children in the patriarchal family, hooks discusses how common parenting practices establish a dominated consciousness in children that is rooted in blind obedience. The insistence that children develop an unquestioning deference for authority results in a submissive behavioral orientation that is shaped to be in alignment with patriarchal expectations. Whereas the "good" child is passive, adaptable and manageable, she embodies a blind acceptance of parental authority, accepts hierarchy as natural and necessary and does not critique or attempt to think outside of the confines set for her by her parents. Imposing the necessity of blind obedience on children is often done implicitly as a part of a culturally sanctioned child-rearing practice and not explicitly as a verbal demand.

By forcing children to accept the legitimacy of parental directives without explanation, for example, the consciousness of children becomes shaped in ways that allow for the unquestioning acceptance of any potential, successive authority figure within the subject/object model of interaction. Because the well-adjusted child is complicit in the dominator model of

human relations, she willingly takes up the role of dominator once a situation presents itself in which she has acquired an adequate amount of social power. In this way, the dominated consciousness is groomed to become a dominator when the opportunity arises, laying the foundation for the acceptance and continuation of dehumanizing relationships throughout the child's life. According to hooks, parent/child relationships that rely on blind obedience for legitimacy are not only inherently unequal, they prevent the realization of personal relationships based on true intimacy and genuine human wholeness.

The expectation of blind obedience to parental authority underlies the perpetuation of patriarchy through its creation of a consciousness that lacks the ability to engage the world in ways that allow for the realization of contradictions. Patriarchy as a system of domination is maintained through dehumanizing practices within the family which prevent both the dominators and the dominated from coming to critical consciousness. With the expectation that parental dictates will be followed without discussion, the child's consciousness lacks the ability to question authority, generally, and does not find it necessary to ask for justification for ways of being that feel dehumanizing. Fear maintains the subjugation of children to parents and parents to the continual co-construction of situations of domination within the patriarchal family. By enforcing obedience, silence and subordination, patriarchal parents refuse to engage in dialogue with their children about their intentions, their decisions, the world, and thus miss many opportunities to develop loving practices of communication.

The maintenance of the patriarchal family as a situation of domination and the submerged consciousness of fear held by the dominators and dominated are naturalized in our society. To even begin to conceptualize another way of being within this institution produces fear in the dominators and the dominated who struggle to think of a way to organize the family other than

as a situation of domination. This is why we laugh when patriarchy is named, when we are asked to align ourselves with a disobedient critique of the family. This is why we silence critiques of the patriarchal family, why we are hesitant to question the abuses of power that too often accompany the parent/child relationship. Humans are fearful of emerging from the submerged consciousness constructed within the patriarchal family in which we have experienced the majority of our intimate personal experiences. For children to engage in rebellious behavior against the patriarchal order is to risk actual physical and/or psychological violence. For parents, the disobedience of children is a threat to the natural order, to the world as they know it.

Freire places the responsibility for overcoming situations of oppression on the oppressed, who must come to recognize the internalization of the oppressor consciousness within themselves and their corresponding complicity in situations of oppression in order to fight for the humanity of all. I contend that it is not possible for children to initiate the pedagogy of the oppressed while they are occupying the dominated position within the family. Children in the United States are generally at a vast disadvantage in terms of social power due to their lack of resources and cultural capital. The variability of children's cognitive abilities and levels of maturity throughout their years as children under the law is inevitable, and this consistent variability present throughout children's growth prevents them from engaging with their parents for the purposes of overcoming the patriarchal family as a situation of domination.

Though we are not all parents, we have all been children, and we have all been subjected to a patriarchal socialization that demands of us assimilation to the dominator model. Within us all is the potential for the manifestation of a dual consciousness that is simultaneously oppressor and oppressed, depending upon the particular relations in which we find ourselves embedded in certain situations. As Freire claims, "The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established

itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized.”⁸⁹

Parents face a number of social and psychological pressures to rear “good” children, and in our contemporary historical moment, this child is identifiable as manageable, passive and blindly obedient to authority. Parents’ attempts to mold children to this ideal often require the physical and psychological violence associated with relations of domination within the patriarchal family. Even when parents do not wish to explicitly engage their children with violence as dominators, to create a consciousness of blind obedience in their children that forces an acceptance of a dominator model of interaction in a dysfunctional world, physical and psychological violence are the default means upon which they rely in moments of frustration because they are simply unaware of alternatives. To achieve the contemporary ideal of the good child and have the corresponding reputation and understanding of one’s self as being a good parent is to engage in relations with our children that seek to mold them into a consciousness of blind obedience, to enforce the primacy of the dominator consciousness and co-create ways of being that perpetuate the patriarchal family and everyone’s dehumanization.

Children grow up, and some of them have children of their own. In this space, these grown children, now parents, have the potential to occupy the position of the dominator and perpetuate the cycle of the patriarchal family upon their own children. The default parenting position is often to parent the way that we were parented. The dominator consciousness reveals itself as still present within us. We are products of our own childhoods, of our indoctrination into patriarchal ways of being. As a component of the duality of the oppressed consciousness, these

⁸⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 48.

grown children, now parents, remain tainted by the way they were taught the world has to be within their patriarchal families of origin. Despite the fact that their understandings of the world were created in the image of their parents, filtered through the fear of freedom that defines their consciousness and required that they operate to maintain the oppressive structures that define their realities, the responsibility remains that of children, of the oppressed, to recall the feelings associated with their own domination within the patriarchal family when they become parents. It is the responsibility of parents to recognize their internalization of their own parents' consciousness and with it the ability/desire/willingness to dominate their own children. These parents, once children, have the responsibility to initiate a pedagogy of the oppressed with their own children, to refuse to engage with them as dominators, to reveal to them the social imposition of the patriarchal family and to work with them to co-create a world that fosters the family as a potential situation of love. Per Freire,

Only as they discover themselves to be 'hosts' of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like* and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible.⁹⁰

Recognizing the oppressor consciousness within oneself is painful. It is not easy to see our parents in our own parenting practices and know that we are perpetuating situations of dehumanization for everyone through our complicity in the production of the patriarchal family. When we work collectively to overcome the situations of oppression that define our realities, we emerge from the submerged consciousness in praxis and critical consciousness. Freire likens the new conception of self that is possible through this realization to a rebirth. Despite the pain, it carries the potential for profound love, for just as with a new life, a new understanding of our relations in the world carries with it an abundance of possibilities. It is this coming to understand

⁹⁰ Ibid.

the present moment as representative of potential that is the mark of an agentic, critical consciousness, revealing to people the specifics of their situations, allowing the contradictions between practices and values to become apparent and sparking an engagement with praxis. In order to work toward relationships with others through which we can better understand reality, to collectively engage in critical thinking, to reflect and take action upon the world in order to transform it requires a relinquishing of both the dominator and the dominated consciousness in favor of a consciousness that desires a life lived in pursuit of everyone's mutual humanization.

To understand the patriarchal family as a situation of domination is to see the fundamental contradiction in its role as a site where children's growth is nurtured and their formative understandings of love are developed, yet they simultaneously learn to engage with others through relations of domination that reinforce hierarchical ways of being and gendered expressions of emotion that prevent the realization of true intimacy and genuine human connection, maintaining the dehumanization of all. To work toward a transformation of relations within the family is to recognize it as an educative site within which children learn their formative lessons about power, domination and love. It is to see the incompleteness of humanity as a source of potential and the family as a prime site within which to alter our everyday realities in the pursuit of liberation. This work to bring about a new reality that alters the situation of parents and children from domination to love becomes possible when we see our everyday lives as possibilities for transformation and engage in the dialectical relationship between action and reflection in perpetuity in pursuit of freedom.

Chapter 4: Parenting as Praxis, Love as Methodology

What would it mean if we understood parenting to be an educative practice with political implications? How differently would we act in the most intimate of our personal relationships if we could see the family as the first site where children learn about power, domination and love? What principles could guide us in our desire to parent with practices that reflect our highest values for humanity and for the world? What would it look like to parent in situations of love?

If a shift in educational methods can help to bring about a radical societal transformation in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it becomes possible to envision a comparable transformation brought about by a shift in parenting methods within families/households. When we collectively acknowledge parenting as a site of informal education, apply a critical consciousness to our interactions with our children and intentionally develop parenting practices based on an ideal ethic of love, I believe we can facilitate a transformative project of restructuring social hierarchies in pursuit of liberation for all. Freire presents love as the possible alternative consciousness toward which we can strive, and hooks suggests that we turn our attention to the patriarchal family as a specific situation of oppression. Combining these two perspectives, to transform the family from a situation of oppression into a situation of love is to prioritize our intimate relationships as domains with the potential to house a transformative politics and to recognize our personal lives as important sites of resistance which hold the potential for social change.

For Freire, love and dialogue represent the praxis of a liberatory pedagogy, within which the means and the ends, the practices and the values, perpetually influence and reinforce one another. As a requirement in the liberatory transformation of human relationships, love,

conveyed through our methods of communicating with others, is an act of commitment to the liberation of all. When we work together to develop love as an ethic that can guide our actions, we develop love as a practice that allows for true intimacy within our personal relationships. To consciously infuse our personal interactions with an ethic of love is to prioritize the potential for humanization that exists when we engage love as the practice of freedom. Situations of love become possible when we purposefully interact with others and the world through circular practices of love guided by an ideal ethic of love. To do so is to courageously choose love and overcome a consciousness of fear.

If parents engage in intentionally loving parenting practices based on an ideal ethic of love in the pursuit of transforming patriarchal families from situations of domination to situations of love, parenting becomes a praxis. To parent as praxis, as the expression of a desire to consciously attend to power, requires that we check our own internalization of the dominator consciousness and work to establish an alignment between practices and values. It requires that we meet our children as subjects and engage with them in dialogue/love. When we allow parenting to be guided by a loving ethic, we parent *for* the establishment and continuous development of loving practices of communication and *against* subjugation, subordination, submission, blind obedience and forced submission to authority. The dominator/dominated relationship that characterizes the parent/child relationship in patriarchal families can then become that of lover/beloved in families as situations of love.

Pedagogy is a term used to denote a method or style of teaching in educational settings and has highly variable interpretative potential. When pedagogy is approached critically, it entails an intentional attendance to power dynamics for the purpose of enabling critical consciousness and praxis through the recognition of contradictions. To understand the parent child relation as

educative and to embrace it intentionally is to develop a means of interaction that can be collapsible with our ends, a praxis. A pedagogy is, then, a specific manifestation of praxis that refers to intentional practices within education. To engage parenting intentionally is to accept the asymmetrical power relation granted to the parent as an educative site rich with potential contradictions, and through coming to see, name and grapple with these contradictions, parents can intentionally engage in means of interaction that work to co-create a world with their children in which it will be easier to love. Parenting as a political pedagogy, a specific manifestation of praxis, entails engaging in a continuous, dialectical cycle of action and reflection about parenting practices and values between parents and children for the purpose of maximizing the potential for the family to manifest as a situation of love. Parenting as a political pedagogy is an educative process occurring between relational individuals whose relationship is characterized by asymmetrical power relations and through which all parties consciously attend to the power that exists between them.

To say that parenting is a political pedagogy is to call attention to its role in teaching children about love and domination. It is to be conscious of the ways in which we grapple with the power that is bestowed upon us as parents, to refuse the dominator model of interaction and to use parental authority for the purpose of liberation. To acknowledge the parent/child relationship as a relation partly constitutive of each individual's foundational understandings of power, domination and love is to acknowledge the parent/child relationship as the first power struggle in each individual's life and, therefore, as the first potential site for the implementation of a political pedagogy. As praxis, the means and the ends are one. Enabling those in our care to come to critical consciousness through subject/subject relations and love/dialogue is a purposeful mediation of power intended to disrupt the child's socialization into an acceptance of the

dominator consciousness. Parental actions must reflect their words, and their words must reflect their actions if they are to engage in a praxis that teaches children about power and domination through a political pedagogy intent upon mutual humanization.

To overcome the patriarchal family as a situation of domination, we must work to dismantle the practices that maintain our dehumanization, instead working toward the process of establishing situations of love. When we come to see how patriarchy, as a system of domination, defines and constrains the material conditions within the patriarchal family that shape our foundational understandings of love and domination, we begin to see how it promotes a culture of fear and suppresses relations based on love in the very place we are supposed to learn it. Because part of a parent's job is to socialize her child into the world, an intentional approach to parenting requires that she also reveal the power dynamics and potential for domination that exists within the patriarchal family and the parent/child relationship. Because she wants to be accountable, the parent must expose her children to the patriarchal underpinnings of the social order and of the expected family organization. The potential abuse of her own power must be actively mediated through open, honest dialogue with her children from a place of love. Where the pedagogy of the oppressed is a method of engaging with others in a variety of educative settings in an attempt to bring about a new reality that alters the situation of oppression so as to enable a more fully human experience for all, parenting as a political pedagogy is an attempt to engage the parent/child relationship as a specific educative site in an attempt to bring about a new daily lived reality that transforms the patriarchal family from a situation of oppression to a situation of love.

Because of the centrality of our interactions with others in the creation of another way of being, Freire insists that we attend to the dynamics of our personal relationships. Whereas the

teacher/student relationship represents a vital contradiction between values and practices in education, the parent/child relationship within families/households must also be transformed from subject/object relations to subject/subject relations in order to overcome its contradiction and enable true dialogue. To begin the work of diminishing the hierarchical distinctions that structure oppressive situations, we must meet the other from a place of vulnerability. When parents engage with children in ways that promote their humanization, they recognize the potential inherent in human incompleteness, help children understand the material conditions of their historical realities, nurture practices of critical thinking, love them from a place of humility and faith in humankind and work in solidarity with them for the purpose of elevating consciousness. To think of parenting as praxis is to parent from a place of intentionality, undermining the action/reflection dichotomy through the emphasis on aligning parenting practices with the highest possible human value, love. To alter the authority present in the parent/child relationship in such a way that establishes subject/subject relations and allows for the collective co-creation of action influenced by reflection in perpetuity, we realize social transformation in the process toward humanization represented by the parent/child relationship.

In Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, he presents the problem-posing concept of education as the means through which to achieve praxis and critical consciousness. When we are hopeful for the future, we believe that transformation is possible and seek methods that will help us to systematically alter our daily, lived realities. As an educative attempt to bring about a new reality that alters the situation of domination within patriarchal families, parenting through the problem-posing concept of education would entail a collective discussion regarding the material conditions of reality. This critical interrogation of reality reveals the specific daily manifestations of patriarchy within particular family situations, allowing for the recognition of contradictions

through the questioning and criticizing of authoritative, and presumably natural, means of organizing and conducting life within families/households. Prompting discussion by grappling with problems that are directly applicable to parents and children's daily lived realities, they can work together to overcome contradictions between practices and values, co-creating a world that allows for a fuller expression of everyone's humanity. Parenting for critical consciousness becomes not only possible, but necessary.

To name patriarchy is to call attention to its existence as a system of domination that structures our material reality. Through praxis and critical consciousness, breaking the silence surrounding patriarchy enables us to see the contradiction that it poses to the realization of our humanity, the ways that it underlies a dysfunctional understanding of love and human relations, keeping us mired in our own dehumanization and encouraging parents and children to rebel against it in pursuit of freedom, in pursuit of its transformation. The act of naming is a process enabled by our very humanity and, as such, engaging in this process represents the praxis of striving toward humanization that allows for the collective realization of critical consciousness. Once we name patriarchy as the system of domination structuring our family lives and relations with others and with the world, we can work toward the co-creation of a situation of love, allowing love as an ethical ideal to guide our praxis toward humanization. This act of naming occurs within subject/subject relations through dialogical encounters.

The move to subject/subject relations between parents and children is necessary if parents and children are to engage in dialogue. Moving to lover/beloved (subject/subject) includes a collective questioning and revising of the role of parental authority, in which power is diminished in pursuit of a synthesis between values and practices. Within the parent/child relationship, however, given the varying degrees of cognitive and physical capacities of children

throughout the duration of their childhoods and the necessity that parents work to nourish and ensure the safety of these growing beings, it does not entail a complete dissolution of authority. The authority that remains within the parent/child relationship, then, “must be *on the side of* freedom, not *against* it,” according to Freire.⁹¹ Parental authority must not be implemented in the service of creating submissive behavioral orientations that are shaped to be in alignment with the dominator consciousness. Instead, we must come to a new understanding of the “good” child as active, engaged, aware and capable, a child who embodies a willingness to question authority, to engage in dialogue in ways that clarify and alter previous understandings and to think imaginatively and creatively. To parent from this perspective is to encourage children to question, to critique, to challenge ways of being that are understood to be natural and necessary, to go up against the authoritative status quo, to be disobedient, to defy the informal rule of silence.

Within an everyday context, the move to subject/subject relations between parents and children focuses on a shift to methods of communication as the foundation of a loving practice. Within this dynamic, it is necessary that parents accept children’s understandings and expressions of their feelings as legitimate and create the space for children of all genders to express a full range of human emotions. This requires that parents help children to acquire a vocabulary with which to understand and name their feelings and that they take responsibility for the actions they engage in when they feel heightened emotions. Parents can be conscious of the extent to which their actions serve as the primary model for their children’s socialization into expected gendered performances by attending to the ways their own actions either disrupt or reinforce gendered expectations of behavioral and emotional expressions. In addition, parents

⁹¹ Ibid., 80.

must value children's contributions to the family, helping them to understand themselves as agentic and autonomous, ultimately strengthening their potential to acquire a critical consciousness through praxis. Meeting children as subjects includes encouraging them to grapple critically with their material realities and making the space for them to engage in conversations about their perspectives and their preferred ideals toward which to strive. The parent/child relationship as lover/beloved values children's experiential realities in their construction of their own understandings of the world. At its heart, parenting through subject/subject relations is an intimate co-construction – based on honesty and mutual trust – of new ways of being with one another in the pursuit of humanization.

In addition to these characteristics of parent/child relations as subject/subject relations, engaging children as subjects also requires that parents consciously refrain from suppressing children's voices or engaging in other acts of antialogue, domination, coercion or manipulation. The practice of actively working against the dominating tendencies we absorb from our patriarchal families can be understood as refusing to parent through antialogical means. For Freire, this means that we are conscious of the ways that we communicate, refusing to treat others as objects existing for our domination, possession or control. Our parenting practices cannot consist of attempts at conquest over and above our children. Parents cannot manipulate, coerce or otherwise abuse the power assigned to them in this relation. They must work to transform the dominator tendencies learned from their families, establishing instead dialogical practices with children in pursuit of transforming these very tendencies. Parents have the obligation to work toward the co-construction of situations of love within the family through our means of interacting with one another in our day to day lives by placing our highest values

on our mutual humanization through love/dialogue that is premised on humility, faith, trust, hope, critical thinking and solidarity.

Dialogue/love is the method of problem-posing education that Freire believes fosters an engagement with others that is enabled by subject/subject relations. As a means of communication that allows for the transformation of the hierarchical dominator/dominated parent/child relationship to become a more horizontal lover/beloved parent/child relationship, dialogue allows for a purposeful grappling with power in the process of enabling another to become more fully human. The ways we communicate with children can set them up for a lifetime of liberatory practice. If the process of humanization is encapsulated in our collective striving to experience a full range of human emotion in genuine relations with others, learning to engage in dialogue is the foundation of a lifetime of living in process with others as subjects in a continuous transformation of reality. By centering love/dialogue as method, as the paradigm through which we engage with others and with the world, as means and end, in the here and now, we center the continuous process of engaging critical consciousness and praxis, allowing our lives to be living expressions of our desire for freedom.

As an aim, love is an orientation toward humanity, an ethic, a value, a goal, an ideal. As a means, love is a practice. It is the way that we engage with others in the pursuit of understanding our world. This is why love is central to dialogue. If love is dialogue itself, then at its core, love is the way that we communicate with others, requiring us to be fully present with others as subjects in solidarity. To love our children means to engage with them in practices of communication that encompass humility, faith, trust, hope, critical thinking and solidarity, all of Freire's components of dialogue. Because love is presented as an essential component of the method of dialogue, the purpose of the method and the method itself, love is necessarily

chronologically prior to our engagement with our children in dialogue and present throughout our dialogical encounters, dissolving any duality between the means, dialogue/love, and our desired ends, a world in constant process toward the realization of our fullest humanity. Love enables dialogue, which further enables love and vice versa in perpetuity.

Because dialogue requires humility, faith, trust, hope, love and critical thinking in solidarity with others and with the world, parents must recognize that they are not all-knowing; the parent is in fact fallible, capable of making mistakes and learning from them. Facing the limits of our understanding, acting with humility, requires an acceptance of our vulnerability, our incompleteness as humans. It is to take seriously the critiques and conceptions of reality as they are held by others, including our children, as we are all always learning and growing and changing and loving. To engage in dialogue/love, I have to have an orientation toward the world that is hopeful for the future and has faith in the abilities of others to work collectively in this work of our mutual humanization. If I trust my children, I have to believe in their abilities to think for themselves and to help unveil the world of oppression that defines our reality. The understandings accessible to all are expanded when critical thought is engaged in communion with others, helping to reveal a fuller account of the material reality that shapes all of our lives. As beings who have not yet fully internalized their indoctrination into the status quo through their socialization into patriarchal ways of being, children have access to a particularly critical perspective of human interaction that adults have long grown accustomed to. Without solidarity with our children, we cannot learn mutual trust, engage in dialogue about reality, think critically about how to achieve a world that better enables the humanization of all, overcome the fear that has previously defined our consciousness or come to realize the family as a situation of love. To

engage parenting as a political pedagogy is to foster a praxis that is a continual process of love/dialogue and action/reflection.

If dialogue is love, when we communicate, we are also teaching/learning about love and domination. Within the family, moments that teach us about love and domination are inherently entangled with one another. How we communicate within the family sets the tone for the ways that we will communicate/love for the rest of our lives. Choosing to communicate intentionally within the family is a way to teach kids about love and the possibility that we can purposefully mediate relations of asymmetrical power between humans and check the potential for domination; it is a political pedagogy. As a mother, I engage my children from a place of love because my love for my children holds the highest possible value in my life, because I want them to know a form of love that is openly communicative about the power dynamic between us and experienced in abundance. I accept my role as their teacher of love and domination, and I humbly accept the lessons I learn in return.

Love is the purpose of life, the ideal ethic toward which we should strive because it represents the fullest expression of the freedom of humanity, which is to experience ourselves as whole, as capable of genuine emotional expression and true intimacy. It is the means and the end, the method and the goal. As a practice, it is to communicate with one another intentionally, to meet the other as subject from a place of vulnerability, trust, humility, hope, faith and solidarity, to actively work against the dominating tendencies that we absorb from our families and our societies. It is to live as if our very existence *is* love, to continuously engage in reflection about our loving practices with those we love in an attempt to perfect it, to realize its ideal. As an ethical ideal, love guides our moral decision making in everyday situations through these practices.

Situations of love are possible when we purposefully engage others and the world through practices of love as guided by love as an ethical ideal. Parenting as praxis with the use of love/dialogue as methodology is one way to achieve a fuller experience of humanity for all. When we understand life as always in process and seek to understand the material reality that constitutes the limits of our everyday situations, we come to critical consciousness and engage in praxis, realizing our own liberation through our everyday interactions. The achievement of this new reality is never-ending, always in process, encompassed by the means as much as the intentional move toward its goal.

In conclusion, I contend that breaking the silence about our everyday experiences with patriarchal families is a necessary practice, however painful. Coming to see our intimate relationships as structured by patriarchy is the first step toward revealing the potential that lies in our incompleteness as humans. When we believe that another way is possible, we can begin the work of overcoming the dominator model of human relationships and bringing into being a new reality systematically structured on love.

Parenting carries with it revolutionary potential in this process. When parents choose to act in accordance with a belief in the abundance of love and give of it to their children without fear, together they co-create a world in which an abundance of love becomes the norm, the expectation and the foundation of everyday material reality. Through an understanding of the dominator consciousness, I can pay close attention to those moments in which I want to control my children, when I want to force them to accept my version of reality, when I cannot hear their voices for my own submersion in fear. Resisting the ways that I was parented and the ways that society tells me I should parent, I can choose to meet my children as subjects in dialogue and in love.

Given my own socialization into love and domination within a patriarchal family, I can only begin to use my imagination to envision a world in which life is always experienced in its fullness. I can choose love over and over again as the ideal ethic through which to guide my life, knowing that I will stumble and make mistakes. I can only hope that my children will be there to call me in, to lovingly challenge me to live my life as a tribute to love. Our actions make the world what it is, and through these actions, we can choose everyday to live our ideals. Because I am hopeful, I believe it is never too late to initiate parenting as a political pedagogy with our children, and our children can take their understandings of life lived as love into the world in ways that make it easier for everyone to love.

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