

BOOK
REVIEWS*Breaking Bread*

Breaking Bread:
Insurgent Black Intellectual Life
bell hooks and Cornel West
Boston: South End Press
1991. \$12.00 paperback. 174 pp.

bell hooks and Cornel West's remarkable and exemplary work is literally dialogic — joining in interviews, dialogues and intertextual essays their voices as they explore and invent contemporary versions of Black intellectual life. *Breaking Bread* begins and ends with the idea of the oral, the improvisational and the histrionic as the traditions from which fertile Black intellectual activity emerge. The two authors, one a Black theologian and philosopher, the other a Black feminist culture theorist — to inadequately categorize each — embrace the Black Church's tradition of call and response to construct variations on shared theories, to challenge each other, push one another into new terrain. Their subject matter ranges from popular culture to Black nationalism, from loving friendship to Black homophobia, from spirituality and prophetic Christianity to Left politics, from Black male/female relations to Black/White relationships within the Academy. In their images of African American leadership qualities, White insurgents too will find inspiration for their projects and practices: in the capacity for self-criticism, in allowing others to shine, empowering and enabling them, in collective solidarity, in combative spirituality.

The multivocality of their discourses is displayed in their eminently successful experiments with unorthodox genres: interviews one by the

other, dialogues between the two, biographic introductions the one of the other and, finally, two separate essays on Black intellectual life from an early, male-dominated perspective by West to hooks' antiphonal response in the course of which she explores the roots of her own determination to make herself an intellectual.

Breaking Bread speaks with the authority of experience and history to African Americans who seek to join in the struggle to "revision notions of intellectual work that enable us to embrace a concern with a life of the mind and the welfare of the community." (p. 158) hooks and West each speak from their lived experience as Black intellectuals; they look to the past to claim the traditions as well as to learn from their histories; they propose guideposts to constructing coalitions that are not conventional — communities of resistance. Scholar activists continually seek relevance and social meaning in their projects; *Breaking Bread* exemplifies this graceful merging of the intellectual life with engagement with social problems and marginalized peoples.

At a time when African Americans are experiencing unprecedented gender rifts among themselves, when from within the Black community itself such writers as Sharhazac Ali and Michele Wallace are calling for regressive gender relations, a project such as this that brings a progressive Black woman and man into an intellectual improvisation on themes that inform and challenge everyday life is an event to be celebrated. Between themselves the two vigorously — and always collegially — reveal the lacunae in the other's thought. As they interrogate one another, their dialogues draw the other forward while modelling the critical affirmation of which they speak. hooks consistently reminds West of the omission of Black women in his lists of historical

figures and contemporary thinkers. She points out that the Black intellectual in his essay is male. Having criticized West, she then fills in the gap, citing 19th Century female critical thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper and contemporary scholars like Hortense Spillers. West reminds hooks of the prophetic tradition in Black churches and its importance in the multiple aspects of liberatory struggles. In the spirit of poststructuralist discourse, their reply to culturally established binary oppositions is to problematize them while acknowledging contradiction and difference; between them, they theorize and actualize popular representations.

Breaking Bread speaks directly to Black scholars — those already established within the Academy and those whom the authors urge to take upon themselves this awesome responsibility. For the wider audience of persons committed to the intellectual life, hooks and West investigate the social and ideological production of meaning in culture. They render problematic cultural representations in which the cultural and political are intertwined. Rather than choosing either to destabilize cultural institutions or to restore their authority, they instead raise questions: Whom do our institutions serve? Do they deserve our faith? Can they be changed? Should they be?

Within these improvisational modes the reader seeks deeper and broader scope from the obviously well-informed conversants; we want a clearer sense of the context of the highly complex issues; we want a more probing exploration and a more detailed exposition — much as the reader of a postmodern novel seeks the plotline. But hooks and West touch lightly, albeit persuasively, on their positions, their sources, their informing ideologies. They leave it to the reader to search out the philosophical and historical matrices from which their ideas arise. This unavoidable shortcoming, given the conversational form of the enterprise, is likewise an asset: the reader is stimulated to further inquiry and hence to intensified engagement with the issues.

In its conversational structure, *Breaking Bread* violates rules of normal discourse: the boundaries between genres, between disciplines, between high and popular culture, between theory and practice are transgressed. The reader, White or Black, becomes partner in a conversation that entices to further exploration, that challenges social

values and ideals, that requires political analysis, that exacts behavioral change. hooks and West in their provocative exchanges have indeed accepted "the intellectual challenge to analyze the world for the purpose of changing it." (p. 21) They do not offer an ideology of insurgency nor a program of social reform. They rather enjoin the reader to join their de-normalizing project.

The summons of the authors is for the reader to take on the challenges of the intellectual life, to make of her/himself an intellectual "in the real life-enhancing sense of that word ... to sit with one's ideas, where one's mind becomes a workplace, where one really takes enormous amounts of time to contemplate and critically reflect on things." (p. 81) It is from this spiritual center that the work of the mind arises. hooks sums up the message of this remarkable project:

Never thinking of intellectual work as being in any way divorced from the politics of everyday life, I consciously chose to become an intellectual because it was that work which allowed me to make sense of my reality and the world around me, to confront and comprehend the concrete. This experience provided the groundwork for my understanding that intellectual life need not lead one to be estranged from community but rather might enable one to participate more fully in the life of family and community. It early confirmed what Black leaders in the 19th century well knew — that intellectual work is a necessary part of liberation struggle, central to the efforts of all oppressed and/or exploited people who would move from object to subject, who would decolonize and liberate their minds." (p. 150)

For those of us committed to the life of the mind and concomitantly to insurgent action in the world, *Breaking Bread* is a vade mecum in the struggle.

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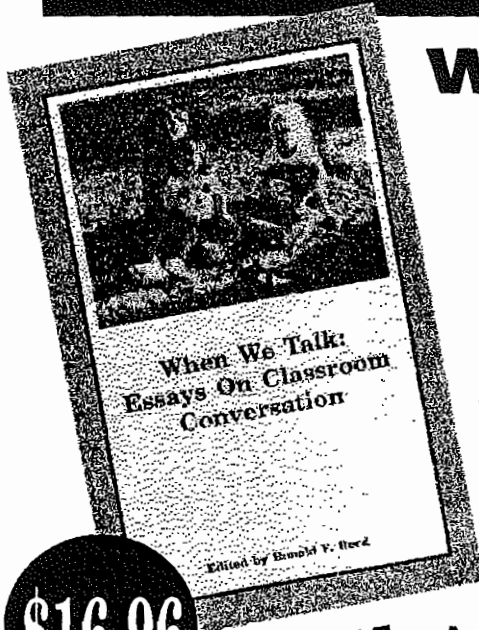
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Analytic Teaching from its first issue, set out a broad agenda within the context of Philosophy for Children. This tradition continues. Areas of interest to readers and contributors included Philosophy for Children teachers and teacher trainers but also included those interested in the role of narrative in teaching and learning, liberation pedagogy, Vygotskian psychology, and cognitive science, among other areas. The broad agenda might be defined as reflective teaching and community inquiry. These two areas will continue to be the mainstay of contributions to *Analytic Teaching*.

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