

From Critical Education to An Embodied Pedagogy of Hope: Seeking a Liberatory Praxis with Black, Working Class Girls in the Neoliberal 16–19 College

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Abstract In this article I present a discussion about the purpose of education of, for and with black, working class, young women within an inner-London, twenty-first century college, and explore the complex and imperfect ways that educational purpose translates into educational practice. I discuss the respective value of two contrasting discourses of education that operate in this college: firstly, a neoliberal discourse of education and educational success; secondly, a critical tradition of education, as traced through the work of Paulo Freire, feminist critics of his work and, ultimately, the work of bell hooks. I argue that a neoliberal rhetoric surrounding education, and the ways it translates into the practice of educating, plays a particular role in Black British, working class girls’ continuing educational marginalization. I thus articulate a more liberatory approach to teaching and learning with young, black women, drawing specifically on a hooksian vision of education as it emerges primarily through the work of, Ruth Nicole Brown and Stephanie D. Sears. Within these discussions, I explore dance as a potentially liberatory pedagogic practice, and articulate a possible approach here as an, always imperfect, embodied pedagogy of hope.

Keywords Neoliberalism · Praxis · ‘Race’ · Gender · Critical education · Dance

Success, Ambition, Resilience

[We aim] to raise the aspiration and attainment of all students by being a College of academic and vocational excellence

Strapline and vision statement of an inner-London, 16–19 college

....

Come together, Dance together, Grow together

We educate our community, bringing to the foreground the critical and creative consciousness of a vibrant school in a deprived part of London...the cuffs are off. We are free

Motto and identity statement of two extra-curricular clubs within this same college

....

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This article lays the theoretical foundations for a particular praxical (hooks 1994; Freire 1996) question: what might be the features of a socially just pedagogical approach to working with black, working class, young women, particularly those who experience forms of educational exclusion, within an inner-London, twenty-first century college? I present here a discussion about the purpose of education of, for and with this student group, and also explore the complex and always imperfect ways that educational purpose translates into educational practice(s). In doing so, I discuss the respective value of two contrasting discourses of education that operate in my workplace, an inner-London, 16–19 college,¹ as expressed in the above statements.

The official rhetoric of the college's strapline and vision statement here should be understood in relation to what Archer et al. (2010) call a "neoliberal political framework" (6) through which the purpose of education is to "produce the achievement vital for the economic success of the individual concerned and of the nation" (Francis 2006, 193). The two extra-curricular clubs, a dance project devised primarily with young black women studying on vocational courses and a creative writing club developed with a multi-ethnic group of A Level students, evoke a very different rhetoric. The motto and identity statement of these two projects resonate with a "critical tradition" (Apple et al. 2009, 3) of education, the goal of which can be understood as "a shared consciousness of oppression, leading to a shared sense of knowledge, and a shared commitment to...finding [a] path to liberation" (Jackson 1997, 464, discussing the work of Freire). Within this alternative discourse, a final contrast emerges: namely, between the more overtly politicized rhetoric of the creative writing club, and the more emotionally charged rhetoric of the dance group. I frame this through Luke's (2004) discussion of critical education: "we can think of the critical...in at least two ways—as an intellectual, textual, and cognitive analytic task, and as a form of embodied political...action...[as] lived...embodied, experience" (26).

In response to the apparent contrasts between these visions, and practices, of education, this article now poses two inter-related questions. Firstly, what could, and should, be the purpose of education for young black women within a twenty-first century, inner-London college? Secondly, what might such an approach look like in practice? To address these questions I first draw on literature that names and critiques the broad educational context for this study: namely, an increasingly target-driven, individualized and meritocratic approach to (not only) secondary education in twenty-first century Britain. I argue that, in isolation, this "neoliberal" (Kelly 2001; Francis 2006; Archer et al. 2010; Ringrose 2013) rhetoric surrounding education, and the ways it translates into the practice of educating, plays a particular role in Black British, working class girls' continuing educational marginalization (Mac an Ghail 1988; Mirza 1992, 2009, 2014; Wright 2005; Phoenix 2010), and in this should be resisted and re-imagined. I then briefly introduce the rich and dynamic concept of critical education with reference to the work of Freire (1985, 1996, 2014), yet ultimately problematize this tradition with reference to feminist educational theory (Ellsworth 1989; Brady 1994; Morley 1998; Jackson 2010), and with particular reference to the work of bell hooks (1994, 2003). I draw on these avocations and critiques in order to meet the ultimate aim of this article: to articulate a "liberatory" (Freire

¹ This post-compulsory college prepares secondary school leavers for entering university or employment, in offering both A Levels (traditionally academic qualifications) and BTEC (vocational qualifications). The particular residential area of Greater London that the college serves was classified at the time of research as being among the most deprived 5–10% in the country (Department for Communities and Local Government, Indices of Deprivation 2010).

1996; Weiler 1995) approach to teaching and learning with black, working class young women within this neoliberal college.

I come to describe and discuss a possible approach here as an “embodied pedagogy of hope” and do so with reference to a small body of research about pedagogic practice(s): primarily, that conducted by black practitioner-researchers regarding what they critically discuss as “empowering” education for African American girls and women (Brown 2009; Sears 2010), and also my own practitioner-research, as a white middle class woman working with Black British girls in an A Level Dance class (Stanger 2016). Within these discussions, I explore dance as a potentially “hopeful” (Freire 2014; hooks 2003) pedagogic practice in these settings, and with these particular student groups. However, I also discuss and tentatively propose this “embodied pedagogy of hope” with awareness of the inevitability of imperfection and “failure” (Brown 2009) within such pedagogical projects. Throughout, I emphasise the importance of both analysing and developing pedagogical approaches with the lived experiences and embodied histories of young, black, working class women specifically in mind. This is not to suggest that to be “young”, “black” “working class” and “female” is to be a particular type of person, comprised by a set of innate and immutable characteristics; indeed, such an essentialist understanding of identity is at the root of what a number of researchers discuss as racist and sexist practices in UK schools throughout the twentieth century (Mac an Ghail 1988; Mirza 1992; Connolly 1998; Shain 2003). However, I do take the position that while ‘race’, gender and class are socially constructed, intersecting discourses, or, embodied performances within a discursive terrain (Ahmed 2002; Butler 2010), their embodied effects are deep reaching and feel very real, as a number of feminists of colour discuss (hooks 1990; Ahmed 2002; Alcoff 2006). In this, to be a “black, working class young woman” can be experienced, and also mobilised, as a deeply rooted identity within a society materially shaped by the fixing forces of racism, sexism and classism (Weekes 1997; Pomerantz 2008).

Education Under a Neoliberal Political Framework and Its Implications for Black, Working Class Girls

As Davies (2014) acknowledges, neoliberalism is “not a unified doctrine” (3), yet a common characterization of a “neoliberal political framework” (Archer et al. 2010, 6) emerges through contemporary discussion. This is a framework through which value is understood in measurable economic terms, and in which individuals are required to be resilient, responsible and self-producing in a context of both (assumed) individual freedom and acute (economic) uncertainty (Beck 1992; Kelly 2001; Davies 2014). Indeed, Ringrose (2013) defines neoliberalism, specifically as it operates in British schools and schooling, as a discourse through which “subjectivity is re-constituted in economic terms” (3). Through this discourse, students are thus positioned as “machines” of productivity whose goal it is (or at least should be) to “self-perfect” for the future, within a wider system of competition between schools, regions and nation states (Ringrose 2013, 3). An idea of educational success itself then becomes economically rooted, individualized and future-oriented, which translates into an acute focus on academic achievement, that is itself “extraordinarily narrowly conceived [in policy and school practice]...as exclusively reflected by credentials from performance in examinations” (Francis and Skelton 2005, 2). I suggest that this narrow understanding of educational success as academic performance, with young people

positioned as the individualized performers of this success, comes to manifest in educational rhetoric, policy and practice in ways that can be unjust.

Much contemporary discussion raises the same central problem with this neoliberal approach to schooling in the UK: that concerns around and practices towards social justice recede from the frame (Youdell 2006; Archer et al. 2010; Ringrose 2013). As Archer and Francis (2007) put it, “the neo-liberal language of ‘quality’ [push] concerns with ‘equality’...to the margins” (ii), leaving only the individual, as a fully responsabilised subject, accountable for their educational success and indeed failure. These researchers suggest that this rhetoric of the “DIY project of the self” (Kelly 2001, 30), serves to overlook the material effects of structural inequality on young people’s educational experiences. This rhetoric also serves, more covertly, to produce a racialised, gendered and classed notion of the ideal student within British schools in a way that serves to marginalize particular student groups (Wright et al. 2000; Youdell 2006). An ideal educational subject can be understood through Leathwood and Hey’s discussion (2009) of what makes an “educable body” (430) within a target-driven education system: rational, unemotive, innately capable of academic success, and, if not, then at least compliant and hardworking in pursuit of this goal. Within this idea of what makes a body “educable” in a neoliberal educational climate, there is a paradoxical sidelining of the body itself, either through prioritizing a Cartesian notion of the entirely rational mind as detached from the lived experience of the body (Descartes 1993, first published 1641) or through preferring a Foucauldian “docile body” (Foucault 1979). These features of “educable bodies” within a target-driven system cohere with what researchers discuss as white middle class norms of (academic, rational) masculinity and (docile, compliant) femininity that dominate pedagogic and disciplinary practices in UK schools (Archer and Francis 2006; Francis and Skelton 2005). A discourse of educational success that covertly excludes the possibility for cultural difference in this way, as well as sidelining the tangible effects of structural inequality, positions those who fail to “embody [educational] success” (McRobbie 2009, 73), in both their academic performance and their embodied ways of being and learning, not only as uneducable, but also “at risk”, and implicitly at fault (Kelly 2001; te Riele 2006).

The production of “at risk” and “uneducable” identities in these ways resonate with research into young black women’s marginalisation in the UK education system (Mac an Ghaill 1988; Mirza 1992, 2009, 2014; Archer and Francis 2006; Youdell 2006; Wright 2005; Phoenix 2010). Indeed, this body of research highlights two broad themes in understanding young black women’s educational marginalisation in a late twentieth and early twenty-first century UK context. First, are the ways in which black, working class young women face (often institutionally unacknowledged) material barriers to success within an implicitly racist, classist and sexist neoliberal economic system, such as time spent in part-time paid and unpaid domestic work while engaged in full-time study (Mirza 1992, 2009). Second, and more prominent, is discussion of how the implicit adoption of white middle class norms of acceptable, docile, feminine behaviour in schools lead to young black women’s pathologisation as aggressive, overtly sexualised and out of control (Weekes 1997; Archer and Francis 2006; Youdell 2006; Wright 2005; Archer et al. 2010). These labels should be understood against a backdrop of black women’s historic positioning as (excessively sexualised and uncivilised) “body”, in relation to a notion of the white, masculine and, ultimately, civilised “mind” (Ahmed 2002; Hill Collins 2000; hooks 1997). This discursive positioning, as it entangles with a discourse of young black women as “at risk”, is indeed reflected in the language some, mainly white and/or middle class staff members (myself included) have used to discuss some black, working class girls in my workplace: “needy”; “vulnerable”; “high risk of pregnancy”; “too sexy”;

“challenging”; “wild”; “difficult to manage”; “a pain in the arse”; “diabolical”.² Indeed, researchers discuss how an “at risk” or “uneducable” identity tends to be applied disproportionately to young, working class women of colour within educational institutions that are shaped by white, middle class norms and tend to sideline the socio-economic barriers that this group face in achieving academic success (Ball et al. 2000; Harris 2004).

The notion of a young person becoming ambitious, resilient and academically high achieving is not problematic in itself; indeed it is a key route to economic stability and, also as Mirza (2009) argues, has historically been a route to black female empowerment. However, it does seem that the particular “discursive terrain” (Youdell and Armstrong 2011, 145) of a neoliberal rhetoric of education inadvertently serves the pathologisation and marginalization of particular student groups. As Wright et al. (2000) put it: “policy has exacerbated the problem of exclusion [of some social groups more than others] through a reinforcement of the concept of the ‘ideal’ pupil [via] cost efficiency, examination performance and marketization in schools” (10). Indeed, it would appear a rhetoric that prioritises individualised success through a focus on attainment, whilst silencing considerations of structural inequality and covertly prioritising a particular cultural norm of embodiment, creates particular difficulties for young, black, working class women in UK educational institutions. So what might an alternative, enriched, and more just vision of education and its purpose, look like for this social group?

Critical and Liberatory Education: A Pathway From Freire to hooks

An alternative discourse of education, as found in the vision statement of the college’s creative writing club, resonates with a rich body of discussion about critical pedagogies and the benefits of them for education with socially marginalized groups (McLaren 1995; Luke 2004; Norton and Toohey 2004; Apple et al. 2009). Theorists of this tradition often root their discussions in the work of Freire, with Weiler (1995) referring to this tradition in terms of “Freirean pedagogies”. When discussing the possible application of his work in multiple contexts, Freire himself (1985) acknowledges the historic and social specificity of his work, namely, that of class struggles in mid-twentieth century Brazil. However, the researchers cited above advocate a number of broad, underlying principles in Freire’s discussions of the purpose and practice of education. These principles certainly work against, or at least towards enriching, the principles of schooling under a “neoliberal political framework” (Archer, et al. 2010, 6).

Central to a Freirean view of education is that “besides being an act of knowing, education is also a political act. That is why no pedagogy is neutral” (Freire and Shor 1987, 13). Through this view of education, every act of learning takes place in the context of, and so is fully shaped by power relations, and to ignore this, for example in viewing education as a depoliticized “DIY project of the self” (Kelly 2001, 30), would ultimately be to maintain and even collude in processes of marginalization, or, in Freirean terms, oppression. The purpose of education (as innately political) is instead to be found in Freire’s articulation of ‘praxis’: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1996, first published 1970, 33). “Transformation” here is not the improvement of the economically productive self, but is grounded in an understanding of the world as marked by inequality, and oppressive power relations that should be “acted upon” in the name of

² These are phrases I noted down throughout the fieldwork period of the doctoral study that this article emerges from.

“human liberation” (Freire 1996, 21). This finds articulation in a key aim of education for Freire, namely conscientization, which Jackson (2010) explains as “a shared consciousness of oppression, leading to a shared sense of knowledge, and a shared commitment to fighting oppression” (464). Freire describes this educational process, as engaging in “denunciation” of oppressive social structures and relations, and “annunciation” of new, less oppressive forms of relationship and being in the world (Freire 1985, 57). This “humanizing” education (Freire 1996, 36) takes place only in practice, and throughout Freire’s work he advocates a number of pedagogic practices, or methods, towards this aim. The first is a commitment to privileging the personal experience and lived histories of students within the learning process. Central to this process is the practice of “dialogue”, namely, “the encounter between [students], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (Freire 1996, 69), in which the traditionally authoritarian role of the teacher as knowledge-holder is disrupted.

In its call for “denunciation” and “annunciation”, this view of education might facilitate a praxis that could address the material and discursive barriers that young, black British, working class women face to educational inclusion and success under this neoliberal system, as discussed above. However, a number of feminist theorists of education (Ellsworth 1989; Brady 1994; Morley 1998; Jackson 2010), have explored some problematic elements of Freire’s critical pedagogy, and in doing so, resist “reify[ing] it as a methodology or romanticiz[ing] it as a tradition” (Brady 1994, 145). Three recurrent concerns emerge from this body of work. First, is a concern that Freire does not take up “the political and pedagogical importance of addressing issues of identity and difference...within and between different groups of oppressed people” (Brady 1994 146). I would add that this failure to address “issues of identity and difference” head-on in Freire’s work, is compounded by a lack of detailed discussion of how exactly the body and emotions manifest in and serve a “humanizing” education (Freire 1996, 36), despite an insistence on Freire’s part that they do and should. Second, are considerations of the role of the teacher within a liberatory learning process, particularly within formal educational institutions. Indeed, Ellsworth (1989) suggests that “strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact” (306), especially when the teacher occupies a position of privilege in relation to their ‘race’, gender, class. Third, are concerns regarding the rather dualistic and fixed notion of power relations within Freire’s work (Brady 1994; Weiler 1995; Jackson 2010) in which “the oppressor” and “the oppressed” are conceived of in fixed and opposing terms, leaving little room for the more complex and shifting ways in which power operates (Foucault 1978, 1979). In this third critique in particular, the central Freirean goals of liberation from and transformation of oppression are fundamentally problematized.

These concerns, related to embodied difference and power relations, take specific significance here, in that I seek to articulate a pedagogic praxis with black working class girls, a group of students whose bodies (and emotions) can become pathologised and excluded within white middle class, neoliberal institutions. In this particular educational context, there is much scope for “perpetuating relations of domination” (Ellsworth 1989, 298) while seeking to collectively enact a liberatory pedagogy. Indeed, the creative writing club, whose identity statement conveys a sense of Freirean pedagogy, has not in fact become a liberatory educational space for young black women who study on vocational courses in my workplace. The primary student group who attend this club are academically high achieving male and female A Level students, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, who in some respects embody middle class

identities.³ One young black woman who did attend a few of the sessions of this creative writing club decided not to continue, citing the experience as “boring”; another, who studies on a vocational course, spoke about more generally feeling distant from A Level students in the college, a group who she referred to as “the clever ones”. This creative writing club is certainly engaged in its own form of liberatory praxis; however, it does seem that a different, and particular, form of pedagogical praxis needs developing in order to welcome and serve the liberation of black, working class girls who study vocational courses in this college. As a starting point for articulating a more deeply liberatory approach for this group, I turn to the work of hooks (1994, 2003), particularly her discussions of an “engaged” pedagogy of “hope”.

Apple et al. (2009) sees hooks’ work on pedagogy as “taking on part of the role of Paulo Freire in the United States” (ix). Indeed, hooks herself discusses the influence of Freire’s thought on her writing and teaching practice in North American universities (1994). However, to position hooks as “taking on...the role of...Freire” serves to gloss over the ways in which she provides very serious challenges to and very deep enrichments of his work, one being her particular use, and foregrounding, of the term “hope”. This is certainly a term that Freire uses to describe his vision of educational practice:

I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream...Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings...[but] hope, as an ontological need, demands anchoring in practice (Freire 2014, 2).

hooks takes up this term in a similar way, positioning it as a necessary driving force behind the sometimes draining and disorientating practice of teaching in a system of domination (2003). However, hooks defines this system of domination in a particular way throughout her work: that of a “white capitalist patriarchy” (1994, 2003), in which individuals experience processes of power, both privilege and oppression, in relation to their ‘race’, gender and class. This is a crucial development of Freire’s work—one that serves to re-imagine the term ‘liberation’ as freedom from racist, sexist and classist forms of oppression, and as the decentering of ‘race’, gender and class based privilege within education systems (Carolissen et al. 2011). hooks also foregrounds the ways in which the term “hope” resists the somewhat idealistic notion of full liberation taking place amongst these now myriad, and always potentially oppressive, power relations that shape any educational space (2003). In this, ‘hope’ becomes a more a realistic goal, and implies a sustained potential for (even small) change(s), in being oriented towards the future and implying a space for possibility. Under this hooksian framework, the future is not the precarious and risky place it is within a neoliberal discourse of education, in need of pinning down and securing through a string of qualifications; it is instead a space for possibility and (social and political) change. Indeed, hooks often employs the term hope in her discussions around collaborative pedagogies for social justice in the face of “continuing institutionalized systems of dominance” (2003, 1). She discusses the values and practices of this community focused pedagogical approach in terms of an “engaged” pedagogy.

One aspect of an engaged pedagogy, which hooks points out as missing in Freire’s work, is “the notion of pleasure in the classroom” (1994, 7). hooks argues for the liberatory effects of pleasure in “stimulating serious intellectual...engagement” (1994, 7), and more generally, the power of emotion and “the erotic” (1994, 194–195) in generating learning and change:

³ See Archer et al. (2007a, b) for discussion of the relationship between young people’s embodied class identities, and their academic success and aspiration.

given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness...to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom (hooks 1994, 194).

hooks makes clear that by “erotic” she does not (necessarily) mean sexuality, but more generally the sensual, physical and emotional “energy” (1994, 195) that can charge a learning process and “excite the critical imagination” (1994, 195). Another feature of an engaged classroom, which hooks posits as necessary for drawing on the potency of emotions in learning, is the need for it to be a communal space in which there is an “ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic” (1994, 8), and not always in positive ways. Indeed, for hooks, in order to “create an open learning community” (1994, 8), there must be recognition of how oppressive power relations can shape educational spaces, but can also be shifted and transformed by a spirit of openness and “collective effort” (1994, 8). For hooks, a key way in which an open learning community can be created is in the collective recognizing of everyone’s presence and “unique being” (1994, 13) in the classroom. hooks explores this in terms of everyone, both teachers and students, drawing on their own, personal, lived experiences, in bringing “narratives of their experience into the classroom” (1994, 21), so that “everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labour” (1994, 14). Woven throughout these discussions is an emphasis on the “wholeness” (1994, 14) of each member of a learning community, in which there is no conceived split between mind and body, nor a Freirean “concern with the mind” (hooks 1994, 14). Instead, hooks advocates “calling attention to the body” (1994, 191) in the classroom, in order to refuse a continuing “denial” (1994, 192) of embodied difference and power relations in educational settings, but also to facilitate the power of embodied experience in the learning process. Indeed, a number of black feminist thinkers position embodied lived experience as central to any analysis of black women’s oppression, and also to the ways that black women exercise agency and recreate their subjectivities in non-oppressive ways (Hill Collins 2000; Ahmed 2002; Mirza 2010). Under this black feminist framework, and through a hooksian vision of education, there is no longer a pathologising positioning of the black feminine body against the white masculine mind; instead, all human experience and indeed learning is embodied, with bodies understood as both sites of oppression but also agency.

A hooksian vision of education described so far, as it draws on Freirean principles of education as political and liberatory, is one that denies neither bodies nor emotions in the learning process. It is one that recognises and seeks to decentre the complex power relations that manifest in the embodied lived experience of ‘race’, gender and class, and it is one that thrives in the creation of learning communities. I suggest that such an approach might enrich the educational experiences of black working class girls within a neoliberal institution. In order to explore this idea in detail, and in context, I finally turn to the work of three practitioner-researchers who work directly with black, teenage girls in contemporary educational settings, and who employ Freirean and hooksian principles in their work (Brown 2009; Sears 2010; Stanger 2016). I describe the pedagogical approach that emerges through this small body of work as an “embodied pedagogy of hope”.

Seeking a Liberatory Praxis with Black, Working Class Girls: An ‘Embodied Pedagogy of Hope’

I seek now to articulate an embodied pedagogy of hope developed in reaction to a particular situation of “hopelessness” (Freire 2014, 2): namely, the pathologisation and exclusion of black, female, working class students within UK schools and colleges,

institutions operating in a broader neoliberal political system. As discussed earlier, within the rhetoric of such a system there is little room for contextualized understanding of oppressive social forces that shape these young women's lives, both material and discursive, nor the space for actively valuing these young women's embodied identities, forms of agency and resistance, and their cultural practices. I seek a practice and a space in which "false perceptions and debilitating myths" (Darder 2002, 103) about their embodied subject positions can be addressed, and also where the significance of their embodied lives and agency as raced, gendered, and classed subjects can be embraced, in alignment with viewing these young women as fully "humanized" (Friere 1996, 25) within a system of a "white capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1994, 2003). In this I also hope for a practice that might facilitate new forms and understandings of educational "success" that embrace rather than exclude young black women's raced, classed and gendered subject positions.

To start to imagine such a pedagogy, I turn the work of Brown (2009) and Sears (2010), two black practitioner-researchers who have developed what they discuss, and critique, as "empowering" pedagogical approaches to working with African American teenage girls, in the context of two out-of-school dance and discussion clubs run for and with black girls by black women. In the words of one of its participants, Brown's SOLHOLT ('Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths') project, is "more than an after-school program focused on Black girls and building self-esteem...SOLHOLT encourages us to create a space that is all our own...In this space we discuss, dance...and reform the politics of Black girlhood" (cited in Brown 2009, 4). The GEP ('Girls Empowerment Project'), in which Sears was involved as a member of the steering committee, was an after-school space based in a deprived inner-city housing project, incorporating a homework club, a discussion group and dance classes. In order to nuance the discussion for the setting of a target-driven inner-London college, I will also consider my own research exploring processes of domination and liberation with Black British, teenage, working class girls in an A Level dance class (2016). I will explore one key pedagogic practice that emerges from this body of practitioner-research: namely the use of dance as an empowering, 'hopeful' pedagogical tool in praxis with young black women. However, I also acknowledge the ways in which this pedagogical approach is not, and can never be, perfect in achieving liberation for its learning community.

Black Girl Dance: Stepping Out on Oppression, Building Community

In the context of this research, I understand dance as an embodied "cultural and political expression of the social, historical, and political contexts in which it is embedded" (Sears 2010, 123). Through this framework, dance is a practice through which ideas about the gendered and raced, and otherwise socialised human body can become visible, felt and contested in material form (DeFrantz 2002; Gottschild 2003; Stanger 2013, 2016; Hickey-Moody 2009). I also conceive of dance as a space for intensely embodied social interaction, community-building and therefore collective agency, as has been explored by a number of writers regarding the often overlooked potential of dance for political and community action (Hickey-Moody 2009, 2013; Stanley-Niaah 2010; Beausoleil 2014). In this context, dance is a space and a practice where dancers, and dancing bodies, can re-write the dominant script that is written about them, and resist oppressive discourses by "creating a narrative of self" (Brown 2009, 101); understood in this way, identities can be performed and re-performed through dance so that the dancing body comes to "mean and mean again" (Hebdige 1979, 3). Research has also suggested that dance is particularly

significant for the articulation of black female agency, and for the possibility of black women both privately and publicly directing their subjectivities in the face of controlling white and/or patriarchal discourses (Hebdige 1979; Hobson 2003; Brown 2009; Sears 2010; Youdell 2006; Stanley Niaah 2010; Hickey-Moody 2013; Stanger 2013, 2016). In all this, dance as a pedagogic practice becomes ripe for actualising the critical and hopeful and engaged and embodied visions of education discussed throughout this article. I identify three deeply interrelated ways in which dance can be viewed as a “liberatory” or “hopeful” pedagogical tool with young, black, working class women: firstly, in the physical and emotional effects, or affects, of being a racialised (specifically, black), gendered (specifically, female) dancing body; secondly, in the performing of traditionally black dance styles,⁴ with other black girls, specifically in the format of the dance ‘cipher’, or freestyle circle; thirdly, in the showcasing of student choreography in public dance performances.

(i) the black, female, dancing body: pleasure and power.

A theme emerges across both Brown’s (2009), Sears’ (2010) work: that of the individual dancer experiencing a deeply embodied pleasure and sense of freedom through her dancing, particularly in regards to discourses that serve to shape, control and pathologise black women’s sexualities (hooks 1997; Hammonds 1999; Weekes 2002). Brown (2009) refers to the apparent “pleasure *in* their bodies” (90) that she witnessed in seeing girls experiment with dancing in different settings throughout SOHOLT. Brown also notes and then critiques her own initial fear that the girls’ dancing during a high school dance event was “inappropriately sexual” (89). She instead proposes that such dancing was “singularly expressive” (89) for the dancing girl, and an act of liberation from racist, sexist discourses (often most visible in the mainstream media) that serve to both frame black women’s bodies in terms of excessive sexuality,⁵ and also deny these bodies pleasure (sexual or otherwise). Brown explains, drawing on the words of Gottschild (2003), how she came to revise her opinions through her *own* embodied experience of being on the dance floor with her students:

...by dancing we too, “shifted the paradigm, our body parts are not objects but subjects. The Black female (dancing) body is given back – or takes back – what has been stolen by the white colonist gaze...” Certainly, I felt free (Brown 2009, 91).

This rhetoric of becoming a “subject”, and feeling “free” through the exhilarating and embodied pleasure of dancing as a black woman, resonates with both Freire’s and hooks’ language of liberation from (white, patriarchal) oppression. Brown also illuminates how this process of momentary liberation operates through bodily movement and pleasure, with reference to Audre Lorde’s (1984) discussion of “the erotic as power” (Brown 2009, 93), a conceptualisation that hooks also draws on in her discussion of a passionate and sensually “engaged” (hooks 1994) pedagogical praxis.

Sears (2010) describes a similar process of realisation about the meaning and power of the dance practices of the young women participating in the GEP. Citing the work of Zollar, Sears argues the young women’s seemingly sexualised dancing in public events and

⁴ By “black dance styles”, I mean dance forms rooted in West African, African-Caribbean and African-American traditions of social and ‘street’ dance: see Gottschild (2003) and Stanley Niaah (2010) for further discussion.

⁵ See the work of Ahmed (2002) for discussion of how black female sexuality has been framed as excessive and deviant in the white colonial imagination, and how this has become centered on an image of, fascination with and objectification of black women’s buttocks.

in the more private space of dance class should be, at least in part, understood in terms of how “dance provides Black women with the opportunity to reclaim their sensual being” (Zollar, cited in Sears 2010, 132). To reinforce this point, Sears prints a poem that one of the young participants of the GEP wrote about the *feeling* of her dancing:

THE BEAT

I always dance to the beat.
 The beat makes me feel
 fly on the inside and great on the outside.
 The beat makes my mind
 feel like a buzzing baby
 ...
 The beat makes me really hot
 With a capital H
 With an O
 With a capital T
 (cited in Sears 2010, 135)

Here is another rhetoric of dance affording a young black woman a sense of freedom to *feel*—to feel “hot”, “buzzing” and “fly”—without shame or fear. Indeed, through dance, the young women in the GEP experienced a corporeal and sensual sense of “Black female bodies as sites of beauty, pleasure, agency and power” (Sears 2010, 134). To facilitate, or permit, experiences like this in an educational setting such as a neoliberal 16–19 college would be an embodied “denunciation” (Freire 1985) of an oppressive discourse that requires a docile, always academically productive, and implicitly white middle class feminine form of embodiment, and thus pathologises black girls’ moving and feeling bodies. It would also be an embodied “annunciation” (Freire 1985) of a new, empowering way for a black girl’s body to manifest within the (neoliberal) educational space. What both Brown’s (2009) and Sear’s (2010) discussions here also highlight here however, is the sometimes judgemental and controlling presence of adults in the development of (what may not always become) “empowerment” programmes for young people. Although both women ultimately revise their concerns about the “appropriateness” of their students’ dancing, they also both acknowledge the at times problematic relationships between the adult staff and teenage participants in their respective projects, with a prominent theme of adult concern for the safety and dignity of the young women. In this, it is clear that a discourse of young black women “at risk” still comes to operate, even within a pedagogical space that aims to serve young, black female embodied agency.

(ii) communal black girl dance: cultural and historical knowledge in action

Freire and hooks advocate embedding students’ lived experiences and (embodied) forms of knowledge in the learning process. This is reflected in Brown’s (2009) and Sears’ (2010) discussions of black girls engaging in traditionally black dance styles.⁶ The power of such a practice can be elucidated with reference to hooks’ discussion of a “hopeful” pedagogy that decentres forms of white, middle class, patriarchal knowledge and dominance in educational settings. Brown (2009) provides a vision of this in her discussion of the African American girls’ ring games that would commence each SOHOLT session with

⁶ See footnote number 4.

a sense of “experiential learning, culture and identity” (Brown 2009, 100). She cites Hobson’s (2005) discussion of “batty”⁷ dancing within such games:

in that instant, the...game of sashaying and hip shaking transforms into a sacred space...this added spiritual component elevates black women’s dance to a higher plane of aesthetic appreciation (Hobson cited in Brown, 2009, 99).

Within the conceptual framework of this article, the “sacred space” produced through black feminine dance can be understood as firstly a safe(r) space that resists the racist and sexist discourses which constrain black women’s bodies or render these bodies somehow deviant. A “sacred space” can also be understood as an arena for cultural remembering and recognition, in which black cultural histories are danced out, celebrated and “appreciated” in material and aesthetic form. To embed such a practice in the neoliberal college, a space in which cultural differences are sometimes marginalised and (for black working class girls in particular) pathologised, would work towards an act of “transforming consciousness” (hooks 1994, 194), by making a space for and valuing an embodied form of black girl culture. It is also significant that Hobson describes the emergence of this “sacred” and liberatory space with reference to a black woman’s movement of her hips and bottom. Sears too discusses the importance of embedding a space for “shaking the butt” (Zollar, cited in Sears 2010, 132) in the GEP, in order to, as she puts it, “teach girls to love and respect their history, their bodies, and ultimately who they were as Black girls” (2010, 133). This affirms the liberatory and indeed educative (in a hooksian sense) power of not only black girls’ bodies-in-movement, but also of a particular bodily part that is imbued with cultural significance and history in its movement (Hobson 2003). In this respect, the practice of young black women exploring, and celebrating, their cultural histories together through “shaking the butt”, can disrupt a neoliberal (and implicitly white, middle class, masculinist) discourse of learning bodies as ideally docile, or even as a contradiction in terms. This practice can also reposition a sexist and racist discourse of black women’s “excessive sexuality” (Ahmed 2002; Hammonds 1999) as one of communal celebration and cultural learning. However, a rhetoric of black female empowerment through “shaking the butt” is not without complication. Indeed, Brown cites the work of Hobson (2005), who positions this form of black girl dance as simultaneously empowering *and* as rehearsing a “script” for the “male gaze” (Hobson cited in Brown 2009, 90). hooks (1997) also explores the ways in which a discourse of empowered black female sexuality can become coopted by and within the white, capitalist, male gaze. In order to address this complication, I return to the importance of black feminine dance as a *communal* practice.

Brown indeed highlights the significance of dancing collectively and as a community, resonating with hooks’ discussions of learning communities within “education as the practice of freedom” (1994, 159). Brown discusses the power of the black girl dance cipher, or freestyle circle, a lively and constantly moving communal space in which girls take it in turns to enter the middle and then, using whatever movements they choose in that instant, dance—for their fellow black girls, and for themselves. Brown conceives of this cultural event as nothing less than “serious education” (2009, 100), in that “the knower (Black girl/woman participant) chooses to be at the center and make who she is known by deciding how her body moves” (100). Brown goes on to argue that the dance cipher “provides the possibility of creating a narrative of the self in communal company that insists on complex identities...[regarding] who we are and what we want to be” (2009, 101). This insisting on complex identities, for an audience of black women only, resists the

⁷ In this context, the word “batty” refers to bottom or buttocks.

question of whether black girl dance serves either black female empowerment, or a white, male, capitalist gaze. Within UK schools, this kind of communal, hopeful and possibility-oriented praxis might serve to destabilise two “oppressive” (Freire 1996) discourses for young black women. First, an observation within my workplace, are the sexist and racist discourses, locatable in wider mainstream and social media, that position young black women as each other’s competitors for forms of status, and produce forms of distraction and exclusion within their educational institutions. Second is a neoliberal discourse that prioritises individualized success at the expense of community-building (Archer et al. 2010; Ringrose 2013), and serves to position young black women’s friendship groupings as a threat to a sense of order and (academic) focus in the institution (Mirza 1992; Youdell 2006). Again, however, Brown identifies a problematic element of this communal dance practice: in that tensions and hierarchical relationships between young women can at times not only serve to disrupt the liberatory process of the freestyle circle, but can be exacerbated through the dancing itself. This problem is indeed consistent with hooks’ discussions of the ways in which oppressive power relations are ever-present, even in seemingly liberatory educational spaces.

(iii) the public dance performance: challenging domination, redefining success

Brown (2009) and Sears (2010) discuss how the public dance performance is an opportunity for young black women to present their moving bodies through their own visions of and for themselves, and in doing so, potentially re-construct controlling public discourses about them. In Freirean and hooksian terms, young women can therefore become subjects rather than objects of education in public dance performances, in articulating, via movement, a vision and understanding of themselves for others to learn. However, Brown and Sears also discuss a key problem in this particular vision of a hopeful pedagogy. They each give vivid descriptions of the ways in which adult audiences disapproved of the dance performances the girls involved in SOHOLT and the GEP gave, particularly in regards to what was perceived as inappropriately sexualised aspects of their dancing. This forms another example of black girl dance practices evoking a discourse of concern for, rather than celebration of, young women’s embodied subject positions. Despite the problematic nature of the public stage as a liberatory space in this way however, there is something in the performer’s embodied agency that can serve as particularly transformative in a neoliberal educational setting, as my own empirical research suggests.

In my practitioner-research within an A Level dance course that I taught in an inner-London college (2016), I discuss how a young black woman’s public dance performance acted as a form of “denunciation” and “annunciation” in this implicitly white middle class institutional space. I explore the sense of pride and exhilaration Egypt,⁸ a Black British Nigerian student, started to feel mid-way through the academic year when she began creating her own dance solo for public performance. In the creation of her solo, this student drew on the techniques and comportment of classical ballet, a style rooted in a white European theatrical tradition that she had felt forced by me, her white, classically trained teacher, to learn at the start of the year. She went on to fuse, blend and, ultimately, transform this style with the techniques and comportment of what she describes as “my Nigerian dance styles”⁹ that she had learned at home, and “for Hackney carnival when I was in secondary [school]”. I discuss this creative act in terms of a student who had faced

⁸ A pseudonym of the student’s choice. See Stanger (2016) for further biographical details, and for an overview of the methodological approach.

⁹ Student’s own description of the dance styles she used.

oppression going on to “name the world” (Freire 1996, 69) for herself, through a deeply embodied process of “dialogue” (Freire 1996) and cultural exchange in her choreography work. I suggest that she “transformed” (in a Freirean sense) the homogenous and Eurocentric cultural terrain she encountered in the A Level dance studio in a deeply material way through dance. I now, however, also locate a momentary “transformation” of a neoliberal discourse of educational success through her practice here.

In my own inadvertently racist and classist practice as a newly qualified, white, middle class teacher in an inner-city college, I had uncritically positioned these early lessons in classical ballet as a central, neutral and inevitable part of a dance curriculum. I even remember telling my students, hoping to encourage them: “if you can dance ballet, you can dance anything!”. Within a neoliberal educational climate, a covertly Eurocentric curriculum is indeed positioned as a source of social mobility, as Michael Gove, the then future Secretary of State for Education, suggests in his speech to the RSA on 30th June, 2009, in which he bemoans the absence of “Austen, Eliot, Cicero and Wagner” in young British people’s education:

Every child should have the chance to be introduced to the best that has been thought and written...to deny children the opportunity to...become familiar with the best of our civilisation is to perpetuate a very specific sort of deprivation (3).

Following Gove’s rhetoric of the child “deprived” of a Eurocentric curriculum, Egypt, with no experience of classical ballet training, came to be framed as ‘at risk’ of failure in this class, an arena I had set up in both my words and dance teaching as Eurocentric, despite being a talented dancer within her Nigerian dance styles. Indeed, she herself commented that “I thought other people in the class would be thinking ‘what’s she doing [here]?’...because if you’re going to be a really good dancer, you should be able to do...[ballet] right? And I just felt, like...I should have picked something else” (cited in Stanger 2016, 118). Through her choreography and solo performance however, which acted as a major formal assessment for the course, Egypt did indeed become the “resilient, ambitious and successful” subject of the college’s vision: specifically, in being awarded full marks by the external examiner for the originality of her work. In this instance then, a primary marker of neoliberal educational success (namely high academic achievement won through toil and perseverance) became momentarily synonymous with an act of black, female creativity and resistance to a covertly Eurocentric curriculum. In this respect, the public dance performance served as an arena in which young black women could achieve a neoliberal marker of success without compromising her embodied subject position. As a teacher-researcher, the process of seeing Egypt struggle and succeed, and indeed learning of her pain in doing so, has also shaped my own teaching practice, in my striving now to develop more anti-racist dance teaching approaches within my neoliberal institution. I suggest this can be read in terms of an (imperfect) hooksian learning community, in which all who participate learn and seek change.

Conclusion: An Embodied Pedagogy of Hope?

Come Together, Dance Together, Grow Together

This statement forms the motto for an extra-curricular, student-led dance project I have set up with black, working class young women in my workplace, with the pedagogical discussions of this article as a theoretical basis. This motto speaks to an “embodied pedagogy of hope” in this setting, as it has been articulated here: black girl dance as a

praxis through which a sense of embodied community and hopeful self-definition is built in resistance to racist, sexist and neoliberal discourses that serve to pathologise young black women's embodied subject positions and forms of knowledge. However, as the discussions above suggest, such a pedagogical process will involve risk and indeed moments of failure, in which "relations of domination" will be "perpetuated" (Ellsworth 1989, 236). This has certainly reflected my experience, especially as a white, middle class teacher striving to develop a liberatory pedagogy with black working class girls. For example, my relative inability to support my students in their development of the Bashment¹⁰ choreography they love has proven a source of frustration in this current project, problematizing the notion of a liberatory and "sacred" space of black feminine dance. In addition, the hopeful rhetoric of "togetherness", emblazoned across the T-shirts the girls have helped me design for this project, at times seems to manifest in much more complex, tense and divisive group dynamics: it begs the question, does this rhetoric of "togetherness" reflect our aim, or my aim? These areas of difficulty and doubt speak to a question Ellsworth (1989) poses in discussing her own attempts to actually *do* critical pedagogy in practice: why doesn't this feel empowering? Brown (2009), however, is keen to point out that in such pedagogical projects, failure and imperfection are inevitable, and should be both expected and embraced as part of a process of continual, and hopeful, reflection and development. Indeed, as Apple et al. (2009) put it, "critical pedagogy and critical education as a whole—and the research that is dialectically connected to it—is a maturing and ongoing set of projects...projects that are always unfinished" (9).

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¹⁰ A commercial form of contemporary Jamaican popular music, with its attendant (social) dance styles (see Stanley Niaah 2010, for further discussion).

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