



## **Umoja Community Regional Symposium Reading Material**

Please do the following read before attending the regional symposium; we suggest that you read the material several times, annotate and look for connections between the texts. We will work closely with these readings and want you to fully engage these texts, actively co-constructing knowledge, pedagogy and practices relevant for our students. This material will be used in the morning session at the symposium.

### **Readings include:**

- The Umoja Educational Philosophy
- A list of “Assumptions About the Umoja Community Classroom”
- “Critical Pedagogy in the Umoja Community Classroom”
- Excerpts from bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*
- Excerpt from Cornel West’s *Race Matters*

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### **Educational Philosophy**

Umoja is a community of educators and learners committed to the academic success, personal growth and self-actualization of African American and other students. The Umoja Community seeks to educate the whole student—body, mind and spirit. Informed by an ethic of love and its vital power, the Umoja Community will deliberately engage students as full participants in the construction of knowledge and critical thought. The Umoja Community seeks to help students experience themselves as valuable and worthy of an education.

The Umoja Community gains meaning through its connection to Africa and the African Diaspora. African and African American cultural and spiritual gifts inform Umoja Community values and practices. The Umoja Community seeks to nurture knowledge of and pride in this reality. The learning experience within the Umoja Community will provide each individual the opportunity to add their voice and their story to the collective voices and stories of the African and African American Diasporas.

African American students are inextricably connected to global struggles for liberation throughout the African Diaspora. In light of this, the Umoja Community views education as a liberatory act designed to empower all students to critique, engage, and transform deleterious social and institutional practices locally and globally. The Umoja Community will practice and foster civic engagement so that all its participants integrate learning and service. Likewise, the Umoja Community will instill in our students the knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to make positive differences in their lives and the lives of others.

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### **Assumptions about the Umoja Community classroom**

- Student centered
- Continuous, timely and formative assessment of students' work
- Integrated reading and writing
- No formal isolated instruction of grammar
- Strive at all times to include full-length texts
- African American focused curriculum blended with local college course outlines
- Instructors will bring their own style and repertoire
- Emphasis on "presentation" in groups and as individuals
- Early Success
- Relevant and culturally responsive to students' real world experiences
- Writing is a process

- Reading and textual analysis are central to the courses
- MLA, APA or Chicago style documentation

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### **Critical Pedagogy in the Umoja Community Classroom:\***

- Student and teacher are both co-participants in the learning process.
- Students demonstrate competency in multiple ways.
- Students should be encouraged to reflect upon the world in order to change the world.
- Students should be encouraged to construct their own meaning from information/data/knowledge.
- Students should be held responsible for assessing their performance in the course, rather than relying only on the professor to assign a grade.
- Students should be encouraged to engage in metacognition—thinking about their own thinking over the course.
- Students should be asked to build explicit connections among ideas and between disciplines.
- Learning and instruction is dynamic and can be renegotiated throughout the semester.

\*Bransford, J.D., Brown, A., & Cocking, R.R. (2000). *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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## From bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*:

### Liberatory Education

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (13)

### Classroom Environment

“The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained. To some extent, we all know that whenever we address in the classroom subjects that students are passionate about there is always a possibility of confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict... Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy” (39).

### Engaged Pedagogy

“Early on, it was Freire’s insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called ‘conscientization’ in the classroom” also defined as “‘praxis’-action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” and “striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (14, 15).

### Voice

“In regards to pedagogical practices we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students *how to listen, how to hear one another*” (hooks 150).

“I notice many students have difficulty taking seriously what they themselves have to say because they are convinced that the only person who says anything of note is the teacher” (Ron Scapp qtd in hooks).

### Language and Power

“Initially, I resist the idea of the ‘oppressor’s language,’ certain that this construct has the potential to disempower those of us who are just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a place where we make ourselves subject. ‘This is the oppressor’s languages yet I need it to talk to you’... And even as emancipated people sang spirituals, they did not change the language, the sentence structure, of our ancestors. For in the

incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of words, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance. Using English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that white folks could often not understand black speech, made English into more than the oppressor's language... It is absolutely essential that the revolutionary power of black vernacular speech not be lost in contemporary culture. That power resides in the capacity of black vernacular to intervene on the boundaries and limitations of standard English"(170, 171).

### Language and Theory

"Many of the issues that we continue to confront as black people-low self-esteem, intensified nihilism and despair, repressed rage and violence that destroys our physical and psychological well-being-cannot be addressed by survival strategies that have worked in the past. I insisted that we needed new theories rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality" (67).

"I sat for hours with a diverse group of black women and men from various class backgrounds discussing issues of race, gender and class...During this heated discussion one of the black women present who had been silent for a long time, who hesitated before she entered the conversation because she was unsure about whether or not she could convey the complexity of her thoughts in black vernacular speech (in such a way that we, the listeners, would hear and understand and not make fun of her words), came to voice. As I was leaving, this sister came up to me and grasped both my hands tightly, firmly, and thanked me for the discussion. She prefaced her words of gratitude by sharing that the conversation had not only enabled her to give voice to feelings and ideas she had always 'kept' to herself, but that by saying it she had created a space for her and her partner to change thought and action" (73).

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

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**From Cornel West's *Race Matters*:**

1. The proper starting point for the crucial debate about the prospects for black America is an examination of the nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities. *Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority: it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.* The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.
2. Nihilism is not new to black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle.
3. The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities: this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of

service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. In other words, traditions for black surviving and thriving under usually adverse New World conditions were major barriers against the nihilistic threat. These traditions consist primarily of black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support. If cultures are, in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide, then black foremothers and forefathers are to be applauded. In fact, until the early seventies black Americans had the lowest suicide rate in the United States. But now young black people lead the nation in suicides.

4. What has changed? What went wrong? The bitter irony of integration? The cumulative effects of a genocidal conspiracy? The virtual collapse of rising expectations after the optimistic sixties? None of us fully understands why the cultural structures that once sustained black life in America are no longer able to fend off the nihilistic threat. I believe that two significant reasons why the threat is more powerful now than ever before are the saturation of market forces and market moralities in black life and the present crisis in black leadership. The recent market-driven shattering of black civil society—black families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, mosques—leaves more and more black people vulnerable to daily lives endured with little sense of self and fragile existential moorings.

5. Black people have always been in America's wilderness in search of a promise land. Yet many black folk now reside in a jungle ruled by a cutthroat market morality devoid of any faith in deliverance or hope for freedom. Contrary to the superficial claims of conservative behaviorists, these jungles are not primarily the result of pathological

behavior. Rather, this behavior is the tragic response of a people bereft of resources in confronting the workings of U.S. capitalist society. Saying this is not the same as asserting that individual black people are not responsible for their actions—black murderers and rapists should go to jail. But it must be recognized that the nihilistic threat contributes to criminal behavior. It is a threat that feeds on poverty and shattered cultural institutions and grows more powerful as the armors to ward against it are weakened.

6. But why is this shattering of black civil society occurring? What has led to the weakening of black cultural institutions in asphalt jungles? Corporate market institutions have contributed greatly to their collapse. By corporate market institutions I mean that complex set of interlocking enterprises that have a disproportionate influence on how our society is run and how our culture is shaped. Needless to say, the primary motivation of these institutions is to make profits, and their basic strategy is to convince the public to consume. These institutions have helped create a seductive way of life, a culture of consumption that capitalizes on every opportunity to make money. Market calculations and cost-benefit analyses hold sway in almost every sphere of U.S. society.

7. The common denominator of these calculations and analyses is usually the provision, expansion, and intensification of pleasure. Pleasure is a multivalent term: it means different things to many people. In the American way of life pleasure involves comfort, convenience, and sexual stimulations. Pleasure, so defined, has little to do with the past and views the future as no more than a repetition of hedonistically driven present. This market morality stigmatizes others as objects for personal pleasure or bodily stimulation. Conservative behaviorists have alleged that traditional morality has been undermined by radical feminists and the cultural radicals of the sixties. But it is clear that

corporate market institutions have greatly contributed to undermining traditional morality in order to stay in business and make a profit. The reduction of individuals to objects of pleasure is especially evident in the culture industries- television, radio, video, music- in which gestures of sexual foreplay and orgiastic pleasure flood the marketplace.

8. Like all Americans, African Americans are influenced greatly by the images of comfort, convenience, machismo, femininity, violence, and sexual stimulation that bombard consumers. These seductive images contribute to the predominance of the market- inspired way of life over all others and thereby edge out nonmarket values- love, care, service to others- handed down by preceding generations. The predominance of this way of life among those living in poverty-ridden conditions, with a limited capacity to ward off self-contempt and self-hatred, results in the possible triumph of the nihilistic threat in black America.

9. A major contemporary strategy of holding the nihilistic threat at bay is a direct attack on the sense of worthlessness and self-loathing in black America. This angst resembles a kind of collective clinical depression in significant pockets of black America. The eclipse of hope and collapse of meaning in much of black America is linked to the structural dynamics of corporate market institutions that affect all Americans. Under these circumstances black existential angst derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture. These beliefs and images attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character daily in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, for example, reveals the devastating effect of pervasive European ideals of beauty in the self-image of young black women.

Morrison's exposure of the harmful extent to which these white ideals affect the black self-image is a first step toward rejecting these ideals and overcoming the nihilistic self-loathing they engender in blacks.

10. The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice. Under conditions of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, this anger, rage, and pessimism remained relatively muted because of a well-justified fear of brutal white retaliation. The major breakthroughs of the sixties—more psychically than politically—swept this fear away. Sadly, the combination of the market way of life, poverty-ridden conditions, black existential angst, and the lessening of fear of white authorities has directed most of the anger, rage, and despair toward fellow black citizens, especially toward black women who are the most vulnerable in our society and in black communities. Only recently has this nihilistic threat—and its ugly inhumane outlook and actions—surfaced in the larger American society. And its appearance surely reveals one of the many instances of cultural decay in declining empire.

11. What is to be done about this nihilistic threat? Is there really any hope, given our shattered civil society, market-driven corporate enterprises, and white supremacy? If one begins with the threat of concrete nihilism, then one must talk about some kind of *politics of conversion*. New models of collective black leadership must promote a version of this politics. Like alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse. But there is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle. This chance rests neither on an agreement about what

justice consists of nor on an analysis of how racism, sexism, or class subordination operate. Such arguments and analyses are indispensable. But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.

12. A love ethic has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections. Rather it is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people. The best exemplar of this love ethic is depicted on a number of levels in Toni Morrison's great novel *Beloved*. Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in a subversive memory—the best of one's past without romantic nostalgia—and guided by a universal love ethic. For my purpose here, *Beloved* can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity found in the best of black nationalist movements, the perennial hope against hope of trans-racial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self-affirming sanity in a history in which the nihilistic threat *seems* insurmountable.

13. The politics of conversion proceeds principally on the local level—in those institutions in civil society still vital enough to promote self-worth and self-affirmation. It surfaces on the state and national levels only when grassroots democratic organizations put forward a collective leadership that has earned the love and respect of and, most important, has improved itself *accountable* to these organizations. This collective

leadership must exemplify moral integrity, character, and democratic statesmanship within itself and within its organizations.

14. Like liberal structuralists, the advocates of a politics of conversion never lose sight of the structural conditions that shape the sufferings and lives of people. Yet, unlike liberal structuralism, the politics of conversion meets the nihilistic threat head-on. Like conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people.

15. Unlike conservative behaviorists, the politics of conversion situates these actions within inhumane circumstances (but does not thereby exonerate them). The politics of conversion shuns the limelight—a limelight that solicits status seekers and ingratiates egomaniacs. Instead, it stays on the ground among the toiling everyday people, ushering forth humble freedom fighters—both followers and leaders—who have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults.

West, C. (2001) *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage.