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Scholarly Enough

bell hooks' *Theory as a Liberatory Practice* says aloud many of the thoughts I have been having, as well as many of the ideas I have been reading in my course discussion forums. The kind of thoughts and ideas academics are trying to reconcile as they (we?) pursue theory and intellectualism. Even referring to myself as an "academic" doesn't sit right with me; I feel as though I do not deserve the title. As a graduate student, I am still an academic wannabe. I haven't earned a place at the intellectual table, yet. What ideas of value could I possibly offer? What is scholarly enough?

Higher education holds such a fraught position in society: what is its purpose, its position, and its responsibility to the community at large? When academic institutions perpetuate a kind of exclusivity and knowledge gatekeeping, producing scholarly works in a language that intentionally cold-shoulders the so-called "layperson," potentially great ideas and theories only continue to rattle around the minds of the privileged few. Yet, bell hooks acknowledges the paradoxical rift between scholarly work and everyday reality (5). We cannot do away with the deeper discussions, the complex analysis, the intellectual heavy lifting required of university students and scholars, those people who devote years of their lives to gain a kind of knowledge that isn't readily found in our day-to-day goings on. The complexity behind racism, misogyny, ableism, and inequality in general demands focused study, intention, and discussion, the kind we

simply are unable to engage with while we are distracted by putting food on the table. We need intellectuals, we need scholars.

At the same time, we need doctors, we need engineers. We need climate scientists, and we need qualified medical workers and caregivers. We need to educate these people so that we can continue to live in our modern world, which means we are going to need some sort of “elevated” language and rigor to vet the quality of these professionals. However, we also need the ideas, the voices, and the experiences of the people who face barriers to this realm of higher education, who are marginalized, and who may be dismissed as “not scholarly enough”. We need their knowledge as much as we need that of scholars.

As I enter my second year of graduate studies, I am witnessing the contradiction between what is being taught versus what is expected of us as students. I have read countless articles now on how the jargon found within the ivory tower academy is perpetuating privilege by mimicking white and patriarchal standards and imposing them on students who are not a part of that power paradigm. Meanwhile, we are also expected to submit work that replicates such standards. If we do not conform to the standards of the academy, we risk being “not scholarly enough.” And while I struggle with this conformity, I also understand why it is required. For example, we need to source our research responsibly, be accountable for our words, and be ethical in our work. hooks is concerned with groups who belittle theory in the pursuit of activism, as a form of anti-intellectualism (5):

Within feminist circles, many women have responded to hegemonic feminist theory that does not speak clearly to us by this hegemonic trashing theory, and as a consequence, further promoting the false dichotomy between theory and practice. Hence, they collude with those whom they would oppose. By internalizing the false assumption that theory is

not a social practice, they promote the formation within feminist circles of a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is viewed as more important than any theory written or spoken.

Likewise, I am also worried about this kind of anti-intellectualism that inadvertently colludes with the politically conservative brand of anti-intellectualism that labels our universities as “woke indoctrination” factories and nothing more.

bell hooks acknowledges the gap between theory and practice: “If we create feminist theory, feminist movements that address this pain, we will have no difficulty building a mass-based feminist resistance struggle. There will be no gap between feminist theory and feminist practice” (12). Although hooks is addressing feminism specifically, perhaps her solution, or variations thereof, can be applied to the academy at large.

Works Cited

hooks, bell. "Theory as a Liberatory Practice." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1-12.