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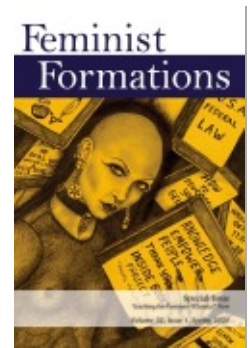
## The Feminist Art of Radical Learning

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Feminist Formations, Volume 32, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 166-179 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0014>



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# The Feminist Art of Radical Learning

Shannon Winnubst

*This essay explores the method of close reading as a critical strategy for feminist classrooms, especially when focused on the foundational violence of anti-Blackness and coloniality. Through a personal reflection on my own efforts to break away from my formal education in “the Western canon” (sic.), I argue that radical learning requires vulnerability and an attentiveness to unconscious habits, motivations, and defenses. I focus on the method of close reading as a pedagogical strategy that cultivates these kinds of sensibilities, while also undercutting the informatics-diversity machine of the neoliberal university. I describe my experiences with this radical learning through three meditations that build upon one another: the methodology of close reading; the effects of reading Black feminists as canonical texts; and the strategic, limited use of canonical European theories as methods for the construction of syllabi, rather than objects of analysis. The essay concludes with an examination of a recent course I designed and taught with psychoanalytic heuristic devices. Throughout the essay, I argue for grounding our feminist classrooms in prolonged discussions of the ongoing impact of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, in all its forms.*

**Keywords:** anti-Blackness / canon / close reading / cool / equivocation / neoliberalism / psychoanalysis / Spillers, Hortense / unconscious

The art of teaching, it turns out, requires a commitment to radical learning—and unlearning. It requires a commitment to staying in the space of learning, not only as a scholar who thrives in the creativity of inquiry, but also as a humbled student who must admit to failures and constraints. This radical learning is not new to feminist pedagogy. Pushing us beyond the colloquial academic fealty to “lifelong learning,” feminist radical learning continually challenges our core commitments and practices, including those deep disciplinary habits that so often render us complacent. Especially as a mode of unlearning, this radical

learning requires a particular form of attentiveness and vulnerability that keeps us viscerally open to encounters with our limits: it is not always fully conscious or intentional. To be uprooted is, after all, messy and sometimes uncomfortable, even painful. By stirring up our individual and collective unconscious attachments and motivations, the specific sort of radical learning I explore across this essay animates the foundationally transformative powers of feminist pedagogy: it cultivates the erotic space of teaching and learning, where we draw and are drawn by one another into complex movements that challenge us at our roots and open us to new, unscripted modes of thinking, relating, perhaps even of living.

In these neoliberal times, we may not even recognize the practices, habits, and sensibilities required for this kind of radical learning. It is not, for example, a matter of constant resiliency. This radical learning is not a remaking and refreshing of syllabi and skills to remain a hot item on the enrollment market. While attention to that kind of repackaging and reconsidering is required of us in today's academy, it too often tracks along institutional time, rather than the more complex temporality of this radical learning I am invoking. To be sure, speaking as a chair who has guided (and also forced) the complete redesign of both graduate and undergraduate curricula, I believe that the systemic revision of curricula that the neoliberal university incites through the regulative mechanisms known as "assessment" can produce beneficial outcomes for both the enrollment market and, more importantly, effective feminist pedagogy. I am an advocate for this kind of revision when facilitated by feminist pedagogues and administrators.<sup>1</sup> However, we must not confuse or conflate that kind of revision with the ongoing processes of radical learning that uproot, challenge, transform, cultivate, and animate our core disciplinary, political, and even ethical commitments. The institutional time of the neoliberal university, quite sadly, does not often enable the kind of protracted time and space that this radical learning, with its prerequisite of vulnerability, requires.

The unlearning aspect of this radical learning manifests differently across disciplinary trainings. For me, trained in so-called "history of Western culture and philosophy," this unlearning manifests around questions of canonization and the methods that subtend it, especially the art of close reading. In this essay, I describe my experiences with this radical learning through three meditations that build upon one another: the methodology of close reading; the effects of reading Black feminists as canonical texts; and the use of canonical European theories as methods for the construction of syllabi, rather than objects of analysis. My hope is that, by describing these experiences in some detail, I invoke the more protracted temporality that this radical learning involves. The processes, which have been both painful and pleasurable, have not been fully conscious or intentional for me. Perhaps these accounts will incite them further in myself and others.

### The Canon: Tales of A White Queer Catholic Girl

I am steeped in the disciplining mechanisms of The Canon, with capital letters (and, yes, often used as a cannon). Trained as an undergraduate student in “the Great Books” (*sic*) and as a graduate student in the so-called “history of Western philosophy,” I was taught to read canonical texts with exquisite care and attention, something like a medieval monk. The challenges of feminist pedagogy and theory, which I did not discover until escaping graduate school and did not fully engage until moving out of a philosophy department and into a WGSS (women’s, gender, and sexuality studies) department, forced several confrontations: the question of canonicity itself, especially its methods of close reading and intertextuality; the politics of citationality and the limits of European texts; and the ongoing complexities of deeming particular texts “canonical,” particularly as these designations shift geohistorically and pedagogically.

I continue to hold “great” texts sacred, but my barometer for what constitutes that “greatness” has fundamentally changed. Gone is the endemically conservative metric used in pedagogies of “the Great Books”—namely, that a text cannot be considered “great” until it is at least fifty years old. But still here is the reverence for a text that bears repeated careful readings, across times and places. Gone is the endemically ahistorical devotion to the text as a singular methodology. But still here is a grounding in complex texts, of whatever age and from whatever geohistoric space, as a central method among others. In other words, while I share the basic feminist premise that we must continue to decenter and dethrone The Western Canon, I remain committed to the core methodology of close, critical reading that subtends the canonization of texts.

I remain committed, that is, to the art of reading rich and complex texts closely and generously as a critical pedagogical skill that we must teach our students. Even more strongly, I remain committed to this as a distinctly feminist ethical pedagogical practice that is necessary, if insufficient, to teach our students how to undercut the logic of equivocation that increasingly regulates neoliberal cultures, practices, and subjectivities.

This logic of equivocation is one of the most pernicious and sly mechanisms at work in neoliberal cultures. It flattens our understandings of the many differences between the salient categories of social difference. For example, the institutional embrace of diversity *qua* diversity, from pre-K through university education in the contemporary United States, often runs the risk of conflating and obscuring the complexities of specific systems of injustice. By equivocating the specificity of these social differences into the general “celebration of diversity,” this neoliberal logic flattens the critical differences between race and gender, between sexuality and class, between disability and race, and so on. Parsed into discrete units of various “identities,” the discrete categories of social difference are separated and their specific histories are erased. This logic of equivocation smooths the jagged differences between, say, race and gender

into merely interesting social differences that, functioning something like an interesting sartorial accoutrement, feed the sweet hum of the informatics-diversity machine.

Affectively, this produces a cool detachment from the precise histories and challenges of injustice. The erasure of specific histories alters our individual and collective capacities to attach to the force and meaning of specific social differences and care deeply, even viscerally, about the injustices they carry. In the language of psychoanalysis, it erases any lasting cathexes to the particular force and meaning of specific kinds of social difference. It renders us, as I have phrased it elsewhere, “way too cool.”<sup>2</sup> Epistemologically, the logic of equivocation renders every issue of injustice an opportunity for ideological debate and argumentation. Vacated of material, historical, and psychic content, issues of social difference become formal properties that, without any intrinsic valence, are merely objects of ideological differences. I argue that close reading can cathect us to the force of history, thereby short-circuiting both these affective and epistemological ruses. Close reading can move us deeply, opening ways of listening that are not wholly cognitive and, thereby, rendering us vulnerable to insights and arguments that we might not otherwise want to entertain. More specifically, as I elaborate in the next section, close reading can cathect us to the socially unconscious force of the histories of anti-Blackness and coloniality, with their many ethical injustices. With all the rich irony of such a claim, therefore, I argue that the methodology of close reading that is the heart of canonization undercuts this smooth neoliberal informatics-diversity machine.

In the techno-classrooms of the 2010s and '20s, this is no easy feat. The sheer number of technical devices alive in our classrooms shrinks our collective attention span into a fast-paced rhythm of expectation, stimulation, and satisfaction. We have to interrupt those circuits and introduce variable speeds into our pedagogical practices. In luring students into the startlingly countercultural mode of caring about rich, complex texts, we have to keep them connected and cathected to (or, in neoliberal parlance, invested in) the reading and learning processes. We cannot simply command cathexis to this strange, slow practice that does not appear to produce anything beyond itself. (Trust me, I have stories aplenty on the failures of commanding allegiance!) Thankfully, a little popular culture can go a long way: a Janelle Monáe music video or a clip of Serena Williams schooling the umpire on her passion as a mother at the disastrous 2018 US Open Final can lure a classroom of thirty-eight students into reading three paragraphs from Hortense Spillers across the remaining seventy-five minutes of the class meeting. Spillers’s jarring, difficult syntax forced the students to stop and dwell at length with the historical depth and psychic force of the transatlantic slave trade on a range of concepts. For example, by dwelling with the opening passage on the many names that mark Black women in the United States, moving to a passage on the “theft of the body” and the loss of “gender differentiation,” and concluding with the dense pages around the cargo

measurements of Captain Perry's logbook, we explored both the complexity of Spillers's argument and its many contemporary, ongoing, persistent iterations.<sup>3</sup> Students grasped, with a slow and meditative dialogue, the recurrent patterns around Black maternity, Black femininity, and especially Black female sexuality.

The cathexis to close, slow reading must finally catch our students intrinsically, if it is to engage its radical potential. To do so, we have to teach our students how to read. We have to teach them, that is, how to read complex texts not for the gathering of information, but for an engagement with conceptual labor. We have to ignite a passion in them to cultivate the practices of this kind of reading: attentiveness to nuance, allusion (textual, historical, cultural), and syntactical performativity. We have to teach students how to stretch the text, to fight and struggle with the complexity, to play and run with the provocations, to read with generosity and the astonishment of abundance.

This teaching often involves an explicit marking of the mode of reading that has come to dominate the twenty-first century neoliberal university—namely, reading-as-mastery of information. This mastery model, with its positivist roots, should not be abandoned, but rather delimited as one among several ways of reading. We must sustain the analytic skills of the mastery model, while also developing—sometimes *ex nihilo*—the capacities of our students to think speculatively, ateleologically, openly, generously, and creatively. The students in my classrooms, both graduate and undergraduate, have to learn to trust me when I tell them that there are no right answers to the questions we discover in these texts.

The feminist aspects of this kind of reading are, of course, the true lure. When students get engaged in this kind of slow, open-ended reading, classroom dynamics alter. The excitement, for example, of hearing different voices read and respond to Audre Lorde's "Litany for Survival" opens a space of reflection that is at once personal, structural, and aesthetic. It moves us all in and out of personal experience, that fraught bastion of so much feminist work, in a manner that invites students into the discussion personally and intellectually. The rigor of the close reading demands intellectual fortitude and patience, while the fruits of its insights welcome and embrace personal reflections. For example, this is the kind of dialogue that emerges from a sustained practice of close reading: a quiet Black woman spoke up to relate experientially to Lorde's repetition of endless fears, she opened the possibility that fear can be both specific and general; a more verbose Black woman then ran with this idea to talk about how queer Black lives compound this kind of fear, which then looped back to the ongoing conversations about the status of "gender" from the perspective of the transatlantic slave trade; from here, a white queer student turned back to the text to ask about breeding "futures like bread in our children's mouths" in Lorde's texts; by the end of the discussion, I believe that students understood simultaneously that Lorde is speaking directly to Black women and that all of us feminists must read her texts rigorously and capaciously. The processes of

close reading spark the classroom into a dialectical space of rigorous structural analysis and speculative personal reflection. They spark the feminist classroom into a collaborative, open-ended space of critical and creative activity, wherein we are all involved, together and individually bound through the text, in Lorde's transformative practice of digging deep into our psyches to see whose face "difference" wears.<sup>4</sup>

### **Anti-Blackness and Coloniality: Rewiring the Canon**

The commitment to this method as a feminist method brings me to another fundamental challenge to my own training: the texts designated canonical.

This, too, is not new to feminist pedagogy, which is arguably grounded in the challenging of a Eurocentric canon across the university. In recent years, largely thanks to feminist killjoy Sara Ahmed's scholarship, the politics of citationality have become central to feminist reading, writing, and teaching practices. Her admittedly blunt proclamation in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) that she does not cite white men crystallizes and fuels the current ethos of a great deal of feminist work in the academy, especially inside WGSS departments and classrooms. As Ahmed notes explicitly, this is a blunt tool.<sup>5</sup> As a blunt tool, it easily feeds the well-trodden, antifeminist trope of the feminist-as-cop, especially the cop who only patrols according to the one pure rule of identity politics. We are, in effect, handing over supernatural powers of total determination to the categories of identity and, in turn, rendering ourselves automatons (or, worse, demagogues). But we only fall into that reductive position, I argue, if we are not actually engaging and listening to the deeper, slower transformations effected by a thoughtful and sometimes strategic feminist citational practice.

Allow me to share a meditation on my own reading, writing, and teaching practices to explore this feminist politics of citationality.

Upon completing my last book, I set out on a determined path to undergo this citational practice. I set out, that is, to write and think without recourse to the European canon or to theorists grounded in it. For me, this blunt tool felt something like a radical surgery, excising all my vital organs without any designated replacement. It required me to give up my discipline—entirely, whole-cloth, everything I knew, all my resources. It was quickly very lonely. It is also far from complete. Given that the project involves the letting go of over thirty years of academic practice, I am not surprised to report that there has not been a tidy, neat break in my thinking: I have not fully shed the epistemological and conceptual frameworks of my training. The project of radically altering my citational practices is an ambitious task that has exposed the limits of conscious and intentional unlearning. Four years into this new mode of reading and writing, I still find connections to various European texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries littering my consciousness. The task to shed this habit entirely is likely impossible. I realize that, given the depths of

these habits, I am likely engaged in an ongoing process of radical learning and unlearning that will fill the rest of my reading, writing, and teaching days. But the failures to shed the predispositions of the European canon entirely are, of course, instructive. They lead me to differing modes of reflection on both my own processes of thinking and, more importantly, the many insidious iterations of anti-Blackness and coloniality.

It was, after all, the desire to understand, encounter, engage, and cultivate different attentiveness to the intractable manifestations of racism that brought me to this break in my own citational practices. Among the first transformations was to reframe racism in the United States as rooted explicitly in anti-Blackness and settler colonialism. Granted, I was already moving in this direction with my recent arguments that race functions in a foundational, if always obfuscated manner, in neoliberal cultures, especially (but not only) the United States. But dwelling with the texts of authors such as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman transformed my longstanding conviction that race and racism are constant, infectious structures of psycho-social life in the United States into a grappling with anti-Blackness as the social oxygen of our culture. In other words, through this practice of exclusively reading and writing with scholars of color and especially with Black feminists, I have come to grapple with a wide variety of accounts (in a wide variety of genres) that argue, explore, and incite us to conceptualize race, sexuality, and gender as expressions of deeply sedimented and strongly institutionalized anti-Blackness and coloniality.

This changes everything. It places the feminist citational practice of exclusively reading feminists of color beyond the figure of the cop, with its billy club of ideological purity and reductive identity politics. This citational practice is not, as the culture wars of the 1980s put it, a command not to read “dead white men”—a move that only recenters the European canon yet again. It is not so much a practice of decentering as of expanding. The expansion occurs exclusively through the adoption of the framework of anti-Blackness and coloniality as the necessary, if insufficient, condition of intellectual work in this geohistorical moment. This expansion, especially when undertaken in the methods of close, slow reading, alters the questions we ask and the practices we seek: from abstracted deductions of truth to material practices of justice, from the derivation of ethical principles to the richly textured aesthetics of survival and flourishing, from mastery to creativity, and from scarcity to abundance.

To be sure, this project of transforming citational practices has explicitly altered the texts that I deem canonical in my classrooms. Gone are the European theorists (Foucault, Freud, Lacan, Marx, Irigaray) and the feminist theorists steeped in them (Butler, Grosz, Braidotti, Sedgwick, Haraway). The complex “Great Texts” that show up regularly on my syllabi these days and are often the objects of close readings are written by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Saidiya Hartman, Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, Trinh Minh-ha,



and Sylvia Wynter. But this is not merely a matter of substitution. To explore this further, I turn to my final meditation on the construction of syllabi.

### Teaching the Contemporary US Psyche

The project of unlearning my disciplinary roots in European texts is, as I have said, one that will never be complete. Not only is the abandonment of such a training impossible, but I am also unsure about whether it is desirable. To demand a clean break smacks of purity politics, with its dangerous idealism and, once more, ideological demagoguery. The issues at stake are not reducible to metrics of “right/wrong” or “true/false,” but often of radical reorientation, occlusion, and partiality. This means that the European canonical theories still offer crucial insights and epistemological frames, but these insights and frames must themselves be framed and delimited by the geohistorical and ontological reorientation of the transatlantic slave trade and various iterations of colonialism. For some European canonical theories, this framing will undercut arguments completely; for others, it will render them partial, problematic, and still useful to larger projects and arguments. Part of the process of the feminist radical learning I am advocating is to center our concerns on fostering this reframing, not on the effects on European canon (or those of us trained in it). Put more personally, the process I am undergoing is more one of making myself vulnerable so that I can listen and learn radically, challenging my core assumptions and habits. The intentional distancing from my disciplinary roots in “the Western canon” means not using it as a defense mechanism to keep myself—my identity as a scholar, teacher, and person—secure. The recourse to the European toolbox, to name it colloquially, must be intentional, not habitual, and carefully delimited. The task, therefore, is to use it strategically and, almost always, in very small doses.

My latest mode of syllabi construction, especially at the undergraduate level, provides an example of how I am attempting to use this conceptual toolbox of European canonical theories strategically. While these European and European-derived texts are rarely the objects of analysis in my classrooms, they still inform my mode of syllabi construction. For example, I still use fundamentally Foucaultian methods of genealogy when teaching the histories of scientific racism and sexology; I teach texts in comparative racism and queer studies that draw on Foucault’s texts and concepts; and I still introduce students to concepts of ideology through texts of Althusser and, sometimes, Marx. But my most creative, and perhaps most controversial, use of European canonical theories is in my latest mode of constructing undergraduate syllabi as an enactment of psychoanalytic concepts and structures. Perhaps the most policed, rejected, forbidden, and even denigrated by contemporary feminists, psychoanalytic theory is widely viewed with great suspicion. Particularly in the esoteric formulations of Lacan, the psychoanalyst I have read most thoroughly, this skepticism is certainly justified. If we are going to draw on this European field, we must continually

translate and rewire the particular concepts and schematics into forms that are most fruitful for our feminist endeavors. Following the lead of theorists such as Fanon and Spillers, I continue to believe that this is possible and worthwhile. I believe, that is, that many of the concepts and structures developed under the heading of “psychoanalysis” continue to offer fruitful resources for not only our theorizing, but also our activist labor of feminist pedagogy.

I am convinced that, if we are to transform our worlds radically, we must access and confront the unconscious habits of living, thinking, and feeling that carry structures of injustice. To do so in the classroom requires a delicate play with egos, familial structures, institutional wounds and privileges, everyday attachments, and deep socio-psychic unconscious structures and dynamics. These are the demands, expectations, and energies of our feminist classrooms. For me, as the facilitator of learning (who is steeped in Euro-theory), to bring a psychoanalytic schema to bear provides greater intentionality about the kinds of radical learning and unlearning that are a part of every class meeting. Given that my undergraduate classes at one of the largest public universities in the world are multiracial, multireligious, and multisocioeconomically classed, I do not in any way claim some kind of omniscient god’s eye view on what is happening with each of my students; nor, as a queer feminist, do I aspire to such a creepy perspective. I can, however, predict with greater accuracy the kinds of dynamics that various kinds of material and methods will produce. And this, quite simply, makes for better teaching by the metrics of both the mastery-model of the neoliberal university and, more importantly, by the metrics of radical learning and unlearning that is the heart of feminist pedagogy.

More specifically, I continue to think that the basic schematics of Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis offer fruitful heuristic devices for the functioning of psyches, both individual and social, in colonizing cultures.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, in my effort to ensure cathexis—that is, attachment and visceral concern—of students to the processes of learning that we undergo together across an academic term, I have begun to consider the course, both as a whole and in individual sessions, according to a Freud-Lacanian schematic. In broad terms, I employ some of the most fruitful psychoanalytic concepts—such as the Superego/Symbolic, the Ego/Imaginary, the fetish, transference, *objet a*, and the Real—to serve as guideposts for the appropriate kinds of pedagogical methods and the anticipation of differing classroom dynamics. Without delving into the details that would be required for a full explanation of this method, I understand these concepts to carry the following connotations when put into feminist pedagogy: the Superego/Symbolic refers to the ways that authority functions, especially phallic authority of the sort that institutions (law, medicine, education) carry; the Ego/Imaginary refers to the cultural spaces and representations (such as films, novels, YouTube videos, music) where identities and attachments are forged; the fetish functions as the basic cultural assumptions that our students bring, unexamined and with fierce attachment that becomes a kind of defense

mechanism, into the classroom, such as the liberal progress narrative, the neoliberal celebration of diversity, and sometimes even the feminist panacea of intersectionality (i.e., when intersectionality becomes the answer and end of conversations, rather than the beginning of inquiries); transference and the *objet a* refer to the complex processes through which we, as feminist instructors, become the objects of fascination for our students and must move that erotic energy from ourselves (or other students) into the processes of learning itself; and the Real expresses those kernels of the collective unconscious that cannot be digested—that is, it expresses the foundational violence of anti-Blackness and coloniality. In the syllabus, the Real is the space of radical vulnerability that close reading incites; I elaborate the Real in greater detail below. I use this schematic both as an overarching narrative for the construction of syllabi as a whole and as a heuristic device for the work we do within sections of the syllabus and, when the class is humming, within individual sessions of the class meetings.

For example, we know that students, especially in WGSS classrooms, will engage most intensely when they can find their own identities at stake in the classroom materials; however, we also know that this intense connection to their identities can become a form of narcissism that demands constant attention, blocking and paralyzing other forms of inquiry as well as other forms of identification. By framing this complex dynamic psychoanalytically, I can isolate and focus on specific dynamics at work here. For example, as the class gets underway, it is crucial to provide a range of representations that will catch a range of identities; but, by framing this through the concept of the Ego/Imaginary, I can build fleeting repetitions of various identity-driven representations into the syllabus to maintain this cathexis, while still moving us beyond that and into expansive inquiries. I can also drop fleeting comments and cultural representations into the ongoing dialogue of the classroom to ensure that various identities are still engaged, particularly when the discussions are intellectually challenging.

At the level of the syllabus as a whole, I recently mapped sections of an upper-level undergraduate course, “Race and Sexuality,” in the following way:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| I. Neoliberal Times  | Imaginary & Symbolic<br>Fetish to examine: diversity |
| II. Anti-Blackness & Sexuality                                       | Real: method of close reading                        |
| III. Power of Social Institutions:<br>Science, Legal, Medical, Press | Symbolic<br>Fetish to examine: progress              |
| IV. Whiteness & Sexuality  | Imaginary & Real<br>Fetish to examine: progress      |

While this may appear as a perfect system that should then produce exact results, I only use it as a heuristic to guide my expectations and methods of each section. For those involving the Symbolic, for example, I explicitly inform students that there is history and information that we must learn; the mode of learning as

mastery is fully in play in those sections. For those involving the fetish, I try to let the discourse (diversity, progress) emerge organically from conversations and slowly steer the students to examine it directly; in other words, I let it do its affective and intellectual work in the classroom before problematizing it as an object for collective scrutiny.

To return to my more general concern with close reading, I want to discuss Section II in greater detail. With a general sense (from Section I) of how neoliberalism transformed US culture, with particular focus on the general erosion of a singular cultural authority (e.g., the School, the Family, the Church), students were plunged into *both* the most complex texts of the syllabus and the section devoted exclusively to Black feminists. This is the reading list for that section: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 5; Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”; Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, “The Ship”; Audre Lorde, “Litany for Survival”; Amber Musser, “Re-membering Audre: Adding Lesbian Feminist Mother Poet to Black”; Dee Rees’s *Pariah*. Section II is the anchor of the course. It is the place where students are most fundamentally, epistemologically, and existentially challenged. By framing it as the Real (or what I ended up calling “the sunken place” in class), I anticipated that these texts would render most, if not all, students unable to respond with any cultural scripts. The “Real” refers to that space of the unconscious, both individually and collectively, where rationality comes to a halt and our abilities to make sense of what is happening lapse. When Lacan describes it as that which resists signification, I take it to describe deeply sedimented unconscious structures that disrupt all our usual explanations of the world. For example, when Hortense Spillers enumerates the measurements of cargo (6’4” × 1’4”; 5’1” × 1’4”; 5’0” × 1’2”; 4’6” × 1’0”) that came to replace any concept of sexual differentiation among the bodies who were transported across the transatlantic slave trade, students encounter a powerful image of this foundational violence that cannot plug into any of their premade scripts, such as progress, diversity, or even intersectionality. By using the method of close reading extensively across this section, I hoped to expand this encounter into a protracted space of entirely new reflection—beyond identities, beyond historical scholarship, beyond the usual sort of learning-as-mastery that fills our informatic, neoliberal classrooms. In so doing, I found two significant transformations in classroom dynamics.

First and foremost, I believe the labor of students of color shifted from the tokenized service of educating white students to meaningful work on and for themselves. As I have mentioned, the role of “personal experience” in our feminist classrooms is dicey, to say the least. In our first section, this mode of connection and reflection spun around the room in a fairly usual manner: queer students regaled us with stories of gender and sexual nonconformity; students of color chimed in with stories of racism, both institutional and intimate; some working-class white students talked about socioeconomic disadvantages.

Everyone was speaking according to their ego, in other words. However, as the section concluded and students began to understand how neoliberal epistemologies have flattened the differences between social differences (i.e., as they began to grasp and grapple with the quintessentially neoliberal logic of equivocation), the authority of these modes of personal reflection began to shift and quake.

As we then moved into Section II, students found themselves with fewer and fewer secure places to stand. I believe this happened for all students; however, I believe that it happened differently according to race-identification. For students of color, especially those who identify as Black, the close readings of Fanon, Spillers, Hartman, Sharpe, and Lorde opened fresh avenues of personal and cultural reflection they had never before engaged. The voices of these students shifted from “reports on racism” to incisive, exciting, provocative insights. Animated by discovery and surprise, students of color began to labor for themselves—for their lives and the textures of their living—rather than for the education of white folks in this PWI (predominantly white institution). Many of these students appeared to be grasping for new ways of understanding structures of oppression and their own lives. Meanwhile, the white students found themselves swimming in an entirely different kind of water, unmoored from their usual toolboxes of diagnosing systems of oppression via identity politics and formulaic applications of intersectionality. The white students were not only decentered, but made vulnerable to the disconcerting experience of radically not knowing. They struggled to learn how to listen in a different key, to a different frequency—a process that I hope is ongoing and endless for them.

Finally, I learned through this classroom that the methods of canonicity work quite differently when framed as the workings of the Real or, in looser Freudian terms, of the undigestible kernels of the cultural unconsciousness. I framed the texts of Section II explicitly for the students as the most important texts written in the twentieth century. We then read two and three sentences across an hour, introducing students to this mode of reading and reaping its provocative benefits together. Our conversations slowed and stretched. As a collective, students became excited and began pushing one another farther and harder to read these complex texts. They began to realize a kind of hunger that they did not know existed. They began, that is, to undergo the transformation of realizing the foundational system of anti-Blackness in their own lives. Doing this through the methods of close reading, with its meditative rhythms, many of them came undone. This undoing did not surface through sentimentality (we read Hartman closely!) or egoistic laments. It surfaced through new syntaxes about social difference, especially about gender and sexuality as modulations of anti-Blackness. The repetitions of themes, such as the impossibility of Black maternity in the white patronymic world, and phrases, such as “the hieroglyphics of the flesh” from Spillers or the simultaneously overdetermined and impossible “Venus” from Hartman, began to replace habitual references to “gender,” “sexuality,” “race,” and even “disability.” The students were engaged in what I call

speculative feminist theorizing. Emboldened by parsing such difficult, complex texts, they were collaboratively exploring how to reframe feminist categories and concepts in the radical manner that the texts of these Black feminists incited. It surfaced through students stammering together to find ways to articulate the insights stirred in their psyche. It surfaced through forging unimaginable connections between words, phrases, and tropes to moments from childhood, high school, and sometimes the previous night. Reading complex texts on the foundational violence of anti-Blackness uprooted the students, facilitating opportunities for radical learning and unlearning. I heartily encourage this as a starting point for all feminist teaching and radical learning.

As we all continue in our efforts to cultivate a world that is less brutal and more just, I hope these experiments in the art of feminist teaching will spur further imaginings.

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## Notes

1. Thankfully, we are graced with remarkable feminist administrators in the WGSS department at Ohio State. I particularly thank Jackie Stotlar for her stunningly awesome facilitation of the complete redesign of both our graduate and undergraduate curricula.

2. I offer far more extensive arguments about the logic of equivocation and its many psycho-social effects, especially the production of “cool detachment,” in *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics*.

3. See the original publication in *Diacritics*, pages 65, 67, and 72–73.

4. This is a gloss on Lorde's famous incitement in “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House:” “I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears” (1983, 101).

5. Ahmed (2017, 15) qualifies this practice immediately, explaining that “by *white men*, I am referring to an institution,” and offering the following longer discussion: “This is a very blunt citational policy (and I might need to add cis, straight, and able-bodied to the general body I am evoking). Perhaps you need to form a blunt policy in order to break a long-standing habit. This policy is blunt rather than precise because I understand white men as a cumulative effect rather than a way of grouping together persons who share a common attribute (for discussion, see chapter 6). I am quite aware that in specific instances we could have a debate as to whether such-and-such individual is or should be regarded as part of the institutional apparatus of white men” (270).

6. There are obviously a great deal of qualifications and questions to be elaborated in this kind of claim. Generally, I want to designate European and Euro-derived cultures, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. I continue to argue that, despite the differences that racialization produces in these cultures, the hegemonic social imaginary still produces psycho-social structures that affect all inhabitants and are partially mappable through psychoanalytic heuristics.

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