Teaching What You're Not

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To Be Black, Male, and Feminist: Teaching What I Am

Speaking about the power of the erotic in the lives of women, Audre Lorde has said,

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. (1984, 53–54)

Reflecting on the fear of men who resist movement into the space of "nonrational knowledge" and the dehumanization of women such fear exacts, I have moved to resist the power of the "male world." I have moved to transgress boundaries of patriarchy, manhood, and masculinity to assert a liberatory pedagogical practice that affirms, honors, and respects the mind, body, and soul.

As a black male professor of literature claiming feminism as the primary location from which to perform a pedagogical practice in resistance to racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, I construct a form of identity politics that moves beyond unitary, monolithic,
heterosexist, nationalist, and essentialized race/gender boundaries of who I am, should be, ought to be, might be, can or cannot be in the classroom. My pedagogy is rooted in risk-taking; it merges the “personal” and the “political” to produce an antiracist/feminist approach to teaching literature. My goal is for students to come to consciousness about the interrelated ways racism and sexism affect the gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized status of their bodies in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal culture. This essay examines the methodological imperatives that define, determine, and guide what I represent as a black male feminist approach to teaching African American literary texts. I pose for consideration the notion that education that compels our students to critical consciousness should be liberatory for students as well as teachers.

Articulating a liberatory pedagogy often means putting forth teaching strategies that challenge the “safe” space of professorial authority, move us to rethink our academic training as “field experts,” and press us to confront the multicultural, racial, sexual, and ethnic identities of our students. These teaching strategies compel us to transgress disciplinary boundaries, critical perspectives, and the narrow ideology of identity politics that would have us teach only what we “appear” to be.

Teaching beyond identity politics in the classroom necessarily implies border crossing, transgressing notions of fixed categories, constructing transformative pedagogies that resist, work against essentializing representation. In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, bell hooks maintains that a liberatory pedagogy is freeing for student and teacher, that education should be about the practice of freedom where

Progressive professors working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination are most often individuals willing to take risks that engaged pedagogy requires and to make their teaching practices sites of resistance. (1994, 21)
As a professor committed to education as a liberatory experience, I interpret hooks to mean that narrow, shortsighted, essentialist ideas of teachers teaching only what they “are” inhibits the learning process and undermines education’s humanizing power.

As a feminist professor who is by gender categorization “male” and by racial classification “black,” I teach undergraduate and graduate courses ranging from literature to cultural studies in which the organizing perspective is situated within a feminist framework. Clearly, from a standpoint that represents gender/race problematics around the idea of a (black) man teaching feminism, considering the popular misconception that black men are antifeminist, I represent a position that goes against the gender/race script regarding “men in feminism.” Counter to popular cultural and black nationalist beliefs, feminism is (1) not for “women only,” (2) not the ideological property of white middle-class women, and (3) not man-hating or emasculatory.

Teaching students how to interrogate and critically oppose the capitalist, racist, sexist exploitation of women as a black/male/feminist is not about “teaching what I’m not,” but about teaching what I am—an advocate of a feminist movement in which women and men united across race, class, and sexual preference struggle to end sexual oppression. As a black/male/feminist professor, I am most inclined to think about personal and political intersections, particularly about how to theorize black men’s relation to feminism while working a critique of patriarchy and sexual oppression.

(Re)theorizing (Black) Men in Feminism: Toward a Transformative Pedagogical Practice

Exploring pedagogical formulations I have enacted around feminism, blackness, gender, and sexuality, this essay maps the evolution of my feminist consciousness as a “risky” process, laying bare my thoughts on what I choose to call the conundrums of “black/male/feminist
positionality.” This represents a standpoint fraught with contradiction, in which the notion of “feminist men” teaching in the academy raises issues of male exploitation, appropriation, and colonization of feminism. Can male feminist positionality work as a radically transgressive pedagogical location in which men teach to empower women and men to critically oppose sexism and patriarchy without replicating patriarchal hegemony in women’s liberation struggle? In Men in Feminism, Stephen Heath addresses this question in his essay “Male Feminism.” He argues that

Men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one. This is not said sadly nor angrily (though sadness and anger are both known and common reactions) but politically. Men have a necessary relation to feminism—the point after all is that it should change them too, that it involves learning new ways of being women and men against and as an end to the reality of women’s oppression—and that relation is also necessarily one of a certain exclusion—the point after all is that this is a matter for women, that it is their voices and actions that must determine the change and redefinition. Their voices and actions, not ours: no matter how “sincere,” “sympathetic” or whatever, we are always also in a male position which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation, everything precisely that is being challenged, that has to be altered. (1987, 1)

Without question, feminist movement against patriarchal and sexist domination must be woman-directed; women must necessarily stand in subject relation to the struggle against sexual oppression, of which men are the perpetrators. While Heath says that men cannot relate to feminism politically, he admits that “men have a necessary relation to feminism” because they are the object of transformation. Both men and women (but men especially) must through feminist liberation reconstruct ways of knowing and relating to each other unencumbered by male supremacy. On this point I certainly agree. However, the suggestion that feminist strategizing to end sexist oppression is one of “certain [male] exclusion … a matter for women” brands feminism as a separatist ideology that subscribes to women only think-
ing. Not only is this idea sexist, it promotes a form of essentialist thought that fails to hold men accountable toward the eradication of sexual domination. Women cannot end sexism without men in comradeship with them in feminist movement. Calling for the inclusion of “men in feminism,” bell hooks maintains that the struggle against sexist oppression will be most successfully fought when men undergo feminist transformation, when they are challenged by women to understand that the oppression of women is a form of self-oppression:

Women can no longer allow feminism to be another arena for the continued expression of antagonism between the sexes. The time has come for women active in feminist movement to develop new strategies for including men in the struggle against sexism... As long as [poor or working-class men are] attacking women and not sexism or capitalism, [they] help to maintain a system that allows [them] few, if any, benefits or privileges. [They are the] oppressor. [They are the] enemy to women. [They are] also an enemy to [themselves]. [They are] also oppressed. (1984, 69, italics added)

Women can no longer afford to theorize men on the margin of feminism when women’s liberation is a matter of women’s and men’s daily political struggle. That women should exclude men from feminism on the basis of a fear that men will appropriate and subsequently colonize feminism does not stand. By including men in feminism, women end the stigma of feminist movement as a separatist enterprise that alienates men and reinforces forms of sexual oppression feminists seek to eradicate.

No one can argue against the fact that men already/always stand in problematic relation to feminism. Heath suggests that “men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one” because male advocacy is naturally invested “in a male position which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation.” Acting out patriarchal benevolent desire to protect women in feminism from the evils of men who desire nothing more than to take it over, Heath argues a position
that supports the stance of antifeminist men, who refuse any move to (re)conceptualize manhood and masculinity beyond patriarchy. Moreover, his gender-exclusive "feminism is for women only" standpoint undervalues the potential impact of antisexit men engaged in the politics of feminist transformation. Men must learn how to oppose sexist practice, just as women must be educated in ways to resist it. Are either likely to do so outside the challenge of feminist movement?

Counter to the implications of Heath’s assertions, women are not born into feminism. Neither are they naturally predisposed to feminist thought and practice. They (like men) can become feminists. Feminist thinking leading to critical opposition of male domination is learned. And just as men have learned to practice sexism as a sign of manhood and masculinity, men can unlearn male supremacist thinking. When feminist pedagogues who are men embrace education as the practice of freedom, we construct radical teaching strategies that enable the development of feminist consciousness in the classroom. We show male (and female) students how to formulate feminist critiques of sexism (as well as racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia), participating in a liberatory space that promotes an atmosphere of transformation that engenders self-actualization for students as well as professors. When I teach, students come to know that—regardless of the particular subject matter—my pedagogical strategies are linked to the idea of education as a holistic practice where mind, body, and spirit come together to project a vision of social change. Self-actualization as a key piece in the feminist positionality I construct in the classroom means that feminism enables me to move radically against the grain of patriarchal manhood and masculinity to effect an anti–male supremacist stance. Thus, as feminist allies of women in the liberation struggle to end sexism and sexual oppression, men complement “their voices and actions” toward a radical revisioning of gender relations beyond all forms of domination, including heterosexism.
Teaching Black Lesbian Subjectivity: From Homegirls to Sister Outsider and Back Again

Teaching courses in which feminist thinking is linked to a liberatory pedagogy, I have employed texts in my syllabi meant to destabilize certain race, gender, and sexual constructs that suggest that these categories in and of themselves exist as natural, nonproblematic locations for the formation of identity politics. In my pedagogical practice, two black feminist texts have become crucial pieces toward (de)mythologizing black sexuality; they have enabled my attempt to displace essentialist ideology, which suggests that "true blackness" obtains only in the framework of heterosexuality. Barbara Smith’s Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology and Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde not only challenge heterosexist notions of the (black) feminine, they put forth critical agendas that promote efforts to rethink definitions of womanhood. Moreover, for students critically grappling with and taking apart myths and stereotypes that racially and sexually "other" black women, these texts are enabling tools, empowering students to construct serious feminist critiques of universalized womanhood.

Calling for students to rethink notions of womanhood has to do with my desire to (de)center ideas of the feminine invested in "cult of true womanhood" ideology. Reconsidering the feminine (moving against the grain of white supremacist historical construction of "woman"), I suggest to them that their study of the U.S. construction of female identity necessitates a complex analysis of the interrelation of gender, race, class, and sexuality. I also maintain that a radical revisioning of womanhood that is truly liberatory for all women (and men) cannot take place without the theoretical and critical practice of black feminists. If we are to develop a progressive analysis of gender that resists all forms of domination, it is crucial that black women and women of color theorize the feminine.
For the first time in my teaching career as a college professor, I determined to place at the center of a course an analysis of black lesbian subjectivity. Employing it as a critical location from which to theorize about womanhood, female identity, and sexuality, I recently taught an undergraduate course called Redefining Womanhood: (Re)-writing the Black Female Self, organized around essays, poetry, and short stories in *Homegirls*. Seeking to demystify the black lesbian subject in literature, I began the course with Jewelle Gomez's essay "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women." Reclaiming the invisible lives of black lesbians in black women's fiction, Gomez provided us with a literary history and tradition from which to begin theorizing new notions of womanhood:

The shadow of repression has concealed the Black Lesbian in literature in direct proportion to her invisibility in American society.... Not surprisingly, we are the least visible group not only in the fine arts, but also in popular media, where the message conveyed about the Lesbian of color is that she does not even exist, let alone use soap, drive cars, drink Coke, go on vacations, or do much of anything else. (1983, 110)

Employing the black lesbian literary text to engage a critique of heterosexist/racist ideas of womanhood, I found in *Sister Outsider* the ideological tools to construct a liberatory (re)reading of the (black) feminine. Never having taught a lesbian text, I had to resist the fear that my reading and representation of it pedagogically would appropriate or exploit the discursive practice of black women for the sake of my own "male-conceived" ideas of how I wanted to destabilize female heterosexuality. Yet I knew that Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" would offer the precise theoretical model to read black lesbian fiction.

In fact, "Uses of the Erotic," as an essay critically engaged in clarifying the personal/spiritual/political dimensions of female power as erotic expression, works in paradigmatic relationship to an autobiographical short story Lorde composed for *Homegirls* entitled
"Tar Beach." The first piece of fiction we chose to read in the anthology, it represented a space of gender and sexual freedom in which to challenge traditional ideas of the feminine while radically reformulating it. If we were going to take on the project of redefining womanhood (from the perspective of the black lesbian writer), it required a radical departure that would not only bring my own race, gender, and sexual identities under scrutiny, but would also push the women in the course to interrogate their own identity locations.

A story about the love and sexual intimacy that evolve between the narrator and a black woman singer named Afreke (whom we come to know as “Kitty” as the narrative develops), “Tar Beach” illustrates the power of the erotic. Linking its thematic representation of eroticism to Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” I put forth a critical reading of “Tar Beach” to display its transgressive movement across sexual boundaries aimed to acknowledge, celebrate, and affirm the source of women’s power. Calling for women to rethink the order of their lives, Lorde defines and reclaims the erotic as a crucial element in the survival of women:

As women we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them. . . . When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (1984, 55)

Situated in the Homegirls section titled “Black Lesbians: Who Will Fight for Our Lives but Us?” “Tar Beach” narratively organizes around several thematic strands that anchor its “uses of the erotic” in a focus on the language, history, dance, loving, work, and lives of black lesbians. Set in the New York City in the late 1950s between the Village and Harlem, “Tar Beach” autobiographically unfolds a
woman-identified cultural landscape where Lorde describes/represents/celebrates butch/femme fashion, nature, goddess myth, the black female body, and the erotic, functioning in symbiotic relationship converging in “fluid” images of water, sea, tide, and juices. Lorde’s sensual representation of the visual, audial, tactile, palatable, aromatic emerge from a location of deep feeling within the self where the sensual comes together with the spiritual and political. Affirming their connection, Lorde maintains that

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. (56)

In “Tar Beach,” narrative description of lesbian fashion codes signals the intense interest of the author in projecting a “style” of clothing, music, and body performance that enhances an aesthetic/sensual appreciation for lesbian space. Food even becomes a conduit through which the erotic is signified, as the relationship between the narrator and Afrekete evolves and deepens. The first powerful employment of food as substance of developing significance in the narrative works in the context of a summer’s night party in a brick-faced Queens home. “[T]he downstairs pine-paneled recreation room was alive and pulsing with loud music, good food, and beautiful Black women in all different combinations of dress.” As the centerpiece of a table delectably arranged with a variety of foods, Pet (the evening’s host) had prepared

a huge platter of succulent and thinly sliced roast beef, set into an underpan of cracked ice. Upon the beige platter, each slice of rare meat had been lovingly laid out and individually folded up into a vulval pattern, with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex. The pink-brown folded meat around the pale cream-yellow dot formed suggestive sculptures that made a great hit with all the women present. (146–47)
“Young Man, Tell Our Stories of How We Made It Over”

As if in preparation for the erotic entrance of Afrekeete into the narrator’s psychic, spiritual, emotional, and physical space, “The room’s particular mix of heat-smells and music [gave] way in [her] mind to the high-cheeked, dark young woman with the silky voice and appraising eyes” (147). Afrekeete acts as the living embodiment of women’s power. Like Shug Avery in The Color Purple, she is a blues woman. Possessed with the power of song, she lives fully, transgressing the narrow boundaries of societal moral dictates. Lorde infuses the physicality, voice, and eyes of “Kitty” (as she wished to be called) with symbolic/trophic stature. Rehearsing their initial meeting, Lorde represents Afrekeete in ethereal and earthy terms that register most resonantly in a smell of familiarity:

[She had] collarbones that stood out like brown wings from her long neck... Her hair had been straightened into short feathery curls... [similar] to my own. Kitty smelled of soap and Jean Naté, and I kept thinking she was bigger than she actually was, because there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women. I caught another spicy herb-like odor, that I later identified as a combination of coconut oil and Yardley’s lavender hair pomade. Her mouth was full, and her lipstick was dark and shiny. (147)

Their relationship unfolds in a ritual play of music, dance, and rhythm. With the music of Ruth Brown in the background, Afrekeete introduces her name to Audre “snapping her fingers in time to the rhythm of it.” And it is Kitty’s eyes—their “calmly erotic gaze”—that prompts Audre to say, “Let’s dance.” Moving together in a “basic slow bump and grind... the crowded... floor left us just enough room to hold each other frankly, arms around neck and waist, and the slow intimate music moved our bodies much more than our feet” (146-48).

From that point on, even though two years transpire between the evening of that dance and the next time they meet, the sensual dimension of “dance” re-enfolds the rhythmic nature of the couple’s reunion. In the Page Three, a “gay-girl” bar frequented by Audre, she and Kitty
resume their dancing—this time to Frankie Lymon’s “Goody, Goody” and calypso music by Harry Belafonte. But on this occasion, Kitty asks Audre to dance. Where Audre’s first description of Afrekete only associated her physical stature with “goddess-like” qualities, her second account explicitly conjures up imagery connected to African antiquity contrasted with the modern attire worn by Kitty, clad as a contemporary “black” diva. “[H]er chocolate skin and deep, sculptured mouth reminded me of a Benin bronze. Her hair was still straightened, but shorter, and her black Bermuda shorts and knee socks matched her astonishingly shiny black loafers. A black turtle-neck pullover completed her sleek costume.” And in the ritual of dance, the image of Afrekete takes on a much deeper significance, meaning, and emotional impact upon Audre’s life:

Dancing with [Kitty] this time, I felt who I was and where my body was going, and that feeling was more important to me than any lead or follow . . . as Kitty and I touched our bodies together in dancing, I felt my carapace soften slowly and then finally melt, until I felt myself covered in a warm, almost forgotten, slip of anticipation, that ebbed and flowed at each contact of our moving bodies. (149–50, italics added)

Afrekete moves to nurture and replenish the body and soul of Audre from this point on until their final meeting and separation.

As the couple journey toward the fulfillment of a summer romance in Harlem, Lorde constructs the passion of sexual intimacy in the sensual where smell, touch, sound, sight, and taste converge in a celebration of erotic sensation. Anticipating their first sexual encounter together, Audre registers a religiosity of desire in religious terms. On the way to Kitty’s uptown apartment, Audre notes that “[t]he smell of [Afrekete’s] warm body, mixed with the smell of feathery cologne and lavender pomade, anointed the car.” On another occasion she observes that “[t]he sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters.” Remarking on Kitty’s maintenance of plants in her apartment, Audre traces the movement of sunlight “through the mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously.” In a moment of
passionate intimacy, she observes hers and Afrekete’s as “sacred” bodies in the moonlight (150–57, italics added).

Almost from the beginning of the narrative to its denouement, the lovers’ interaction expresses itself in a “liquid” discourse. Repeatedly images of the sea, ocean, water, fruit, and natural body fluids are invoked. Linked to tropes that signify the feminine as sacred, Audre and Afrekete speak and act through a language bathed in free-flowing movement—against rigidity toward the organic. In keeping with the theme of the erotic as sacred, one may say that liquid substances perform a baptismal function in the narrative. Sea and ocean imagery occur and reoccur in the text: “Her lips moved like surf upon the water’s edge”; “dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide”; “crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea.” Reflecting on her first visit to Kitty’s apartment, Audre poeticizes its thirty-gallon fish aquarium “that murmured softly, like a quiet jewel, standing on its wrought-iron legs, glowing and mysterious . . . magical” (152–57).

Kitty’s apartment, full of green plants, is a world of sight and natural wonder for Audre. Her entrance into its erotic space is marked by typographical shifts in the text in which fantasy, dreams, and reality merge. Passages written in italics represent the power of the erotic on the terrain of explicit sexual desire acted out. Audre imagines Afrekete’s body as fertile soil in which “my fingertips ting[le] to play in her earth.” Envisioning her a (West Indian) goddess of fertility, a cultivator of fruit, Lorde recalls,

And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the underedge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava—those magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue. (153, italics in original)

But both women transform each other’s bodies into sites for fertile cultivation via fruit from the islands. The most sensually eroticized
passages in the text poetically depict the central place exotic fruit occupies in their lovemaking.

We bought red delicious pippins, the size of french cashew apples. There were green plantains, which we half-peeled and then planted, fruit-deep, in each other’s bodies until the petals of skin lay tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between our upspread thighs. There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower. (153-54, italics in original)

Lorde’s sexually explicit representation of the power of the erotic in the couple’s sexual play works against a reductionist/pornographic reading of the text. Moreover, the more the couple move toward sexual consummation of their love, the more nature commands a crucial presence. Incorporating various fruit in their lovemaking ritual, Audre and Kitty affirm a “natural” interplay between nature and the body: “I held you, lay between your brown legs, slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh” (154, italics in original). The straightforward account Lorde narrates here attests to her belief and celebration of the notion in “Uses of the Erotic” that sexual expression that affirms, values, and empowers its subject allows for an uninhibited acting out of joyous sexual pleasure:

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (54)

Just as sea, ocean, and tide manifest figuratively to define the free-flowing nature of the couple’s relationship, so nature conspires with the liquid of fruit and body juices to inform the intensity of erotic
pleasure, dream, desire. Sanctioned by the light of a "Midsummer Eve’s Moon," Audre and Afrekete "mak[e] moon, honor, love ... reflected in the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies." Audre responds, "and I felt the moon’s silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids" (157).

The most performative illustration of the erotic’s creative power occurs when Audre, having made an avocado paste, transforms the body of Afrekete into a goddess of nature. "The oil and sweat from our bodies kept the fruit liquid, and I massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked from your skin" (155, italics in original). Literally and figuratively, Audre receives nourishment from a goddess of nature. As goddess, Afrekete is a teacher of women. Audre proclaims, "Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women’s bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before" (154).

The power of the erotic in the lives of these two women has resonance in the political as well as the sexual realm, and it is its power in the political that can, according to Lorde, empower all women with the capacity to effect change. "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world." She does not exclude men from its liberatory power, but she calls out men’s fear of "examining] the possibilities of it within themselves" as a location that perpetuates their devaluation and reduction of the erotic to the pornographic. Again, I cite her discussion where she distinguishes between pornography and eroticism to focus attention on its political dimension: "There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical" (55–56, italics added).

As a text constructed in autobiographical reflection, first-person
telling steers the narrative movement of “Tar Beach”; the voice we hear most often is Audre’s, pointedly recalling conversations with Afrekete:

We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women. . . . Once we talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies’ strongholds, too much and too often, and how our psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns. (154–55)

And Afrekete, responding to the experience of black lesbians in political struggle of women loving women that Audre characterizes, testifies to its pain but also the resiliency born of it: “And don’t I have the scars to prove it. . . . Makes you tough though, babe, if you don’t go under. And that’s what I like about you; you’re like me. We’re both going to make it because we’re both too tough and crazy not to!” That the women are both “too tough and crazy” not to survive signifies the notion of living against the grain, transgressing the boundaries of heterosexism, “do(ing) that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (59). Audre, interpreting her relationship to Afrekete in political terms, articulates the price “paid for that toughness”—knowing that living in a space of black lesbian subjectivity necessarily means continual struggle and negotiation of the idea “that soft and tough had to be one and the same for either to work at all” (155).

Reflecting on the breadth, depth, and force of the love Audre and Afrekete shared, appropriately Lorde (as author) registers its chemistry figuratively in a trope on nature: “like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge.” Intertwined in a symbiotic relationship, the lovers exist in a kinetic inter(play) among nature, music, and dance, and the sexual performs a ritual out-working of erotic power. Acknowledging the depth of the relationship and the deeply felt presence of “Kitty” in her life, Audre declares at the core of its meaning, “[Afrekete’s] print remains upon [her] life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo” (157–58).
"Teaching (Myself) to Transgress": Putting the Theory of an Engaged Pedagogy into Practice

This section—partly descriptive, analytical, and theoretical—represents the voices of seminar participants in the Redefining Womanhood course speaking about the complexity of its focus on female identity/sexuality in black lesbian literature complicated by the intervention of male feminism and the contested space of identity politics in the classroom.

For me, teaching Audre Lorde’s "Tar Beach" was a liberatory process, where I let go of the fear that being a man could only mean necessarily misrepresenting the author, her text, and its meaning. Summoning up courage to transgress internalized sexist ideas that men have no business teaching or writing within a feminist construct—whether about the feminine, womanhood, or women’s sexuality—I sought to contest, undermine, and subvert the phallic power men represent by putting my insecurities about teaching feminism out for class discussion. As my students learned to cross borders in Redefining Womanhood, so I came to understand the power of Audre Lorde provoking me toward redefining (black) manhood. Black men must begin interrogating our own sexuality beyond the destructive power of heterosexism and homophobia, which have dominated and impaired our vision of black liberation struggle. Commenting on the impact of Homegirls on her, one woman in the course remarked,

Black feminist consciousness pushes your own boundaries and provides you with the material necessary to push those of others. The short stories in Homegirls forced me to redefine my conception of womanhood by giving me greater knowledge and a better understanding of black lesbian identity. They made me realize that though well intentioned in my condemnation of homophobia, my ignorance had led me to hold beliefs that were just as unenlightened as those of the people whom I was opposing. I was defending lesbian identity without knowing exactly what it was. Before reading ... stories by black lesbians, my only contact with fiction centering around lesbian subjectivity, written by a
lesbian had been through ... a white lesbian writer. I now feel my personal/political views of lesbianism are more firmly grounded. I have works to refer to when discussing black lesbian identity and I no longer have to make uneducated assumptions.

From my perspective as a black male professor advocating feminism, discoursing on and teaching the black lesbian text at the center of “redefining womanhood” represented the critical and pedagogical risks I have decidedly taken to construct an “engaged pedagogy” around an anti-racist/sexist/heterosexist standpoint in my course repertoire. At several points in a course (the first day of class, midterm, and at the end of the term), I will ask students to respond in writing to the syllabus and the fact that the course is being taught by a black male professor. What difference does it make for a man to teach feminism to a group of women and/or men or both? What does it mean for a black man to teach feminism to a class in which white women predominate?

Thinking about these questions and identity problematics in Redefining Womanhood, I had to consider what it meant for me to teach feminism to a group of women in which there were diverse racial, sexual, and class politics. Responding to my location in this mix and the identity politics informing the dynamics of this particular class, one woman student from a multiracial background wrote,

The different racial, sexual, social, economic and political identities of those in the seminar were highlighted by the Black male professor's situation. [His] being a man meant that the class did not have a common gender identity. [His] race meant that some of us could identify with [him] on racial grounds, but most could not. The ties between the group were established through a common identification with and appreciation of black feminist thought and the common desire to redefine womanhood. At times I forgot the existence of those ties and felt alienated from the class because of my own multinational and multiracial standpoint. However, reading the works of international women proved to be what was necessary for me to become refocused on the ties within the group while at the same time taking into account the differences.
They helped me realize that it is possible for us to find unity through difference.

(italics added)

Early on in the course, we addressed certain pedagogical issues having to do with the identity of the professor and what happens to those teachers who do not mirror/represent what they teach. Contesting the rigidity of fixed identities (while problematizing the idea of men teaching feminism), on the first day of class, I placed front and center the question, “Since men are not women, should we teach courses in feminism?” At the same time, I posed other related questions. Should white professors teach black, Native American, Asian, or Chicano/a studies, for example? Should heterosexuals teach gay and/or lesbian studies? Opening on to such complex questions as a means to discussing the politics of identity in the classroom means taking risks, particularly when the teacher’s body/identity stands at the center of contestation.

Throughout the term (working from the syllabus, which included a reading list of writings by black women/women of color in and outside the United States), I encouraged women in the course to develop a broader perspective in their class discussion and writing that would challenge essentialist attitudes of sexuality, gender, race, class, and nation. As stated earlier, the seminar’s main objective was the destabilization of these categories, prompting each woman to rethink the stability of her own identity formation within them. Moving from reductive thinking toward an acknowledgment of difference, we attempted to confront racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and homophobic systems of female oppression in and outside the United States—as well as in the classroom itself.

In Redefining Womanhood we often struggled, working through the polemics of race in the classroom. Yet we battled to resist flat, one-dimensional ideas of the feminine that suggested that there must be mirror correlation between what one represents and what one “is” (as if the sum total of any individual could be reduced to a single iden-
tity). At times it appeared that the differences between us were too great to overcome. At other times, we saw clearly the complex relation among race, class, gender, sexual oppression, though the seminar was driven by the intensity of some women's emotional investment in who they represented themselves to be racially, sexually, and ethnically. Pedagogically foregrounding the "differences" the women represented in the seminar, however, I aimed to disrupt the idea that any of us could claim safety in the identities we inhabited.

Class discussions between women of color and white women were complicated by the history of racism in the United States and in the feminist movement. Its long-standing effect resonates in one black woman's comments on the issue of race and who spoke or chose not to speak in class:

The strategy of using silence to gain power or control has been used continually and consistently throughout this course for the "white feminists" to gain power in terms of what has been discussed, what [would] be discussed and what [was] accomplished this semester.... I (did) not feel it [was] my responsibility to engage these white feminists in dialogue to produce a useful class. Everyday I have to push myself as a woman of color, poor woman, black woman, oppressed, sometimes privileged woman to speak.... I believe that the majority of students used silence to counteract what they were learning.

I too experienced feelings of "outsiderness" and silence. After I shared this in class, one of the women in the seminar reflected on it:

[He] articulated [his] initial fears related to being a black man teaching a class on feminist theory.... [I]t was important that [he] brought [his] problem to the table from day one. It enabled us to discuss the issue as a class, and for me, the discussions helped me to problematize and deal with my own position as a white female in a class on black feminist theory. (italics in original)

Yet within the domain of the classroom, I remain conscious of the potential pain transgressive pedagogy may invoke in students when they are asked to unpack the baggage around the identity problematics they bring with them.
I remember distinctly one class session of the Redefining Womanhood course when certain of the women adamantly voiced their opposition to the idea of men as feminists and my feeling of having to defend a personal claim to feminist positionality. The problematics of my being a man in the class and issues of sexism and patriarchy had to do with not only my physical presence as a "black man" (with all its myths and stereotypes in tow) but also the privilege with which my male voice resonated. Questioning the power of my voice in the classroom, another woman student wrote that

As for the politic of this class being taught by an Afro-American teacher . . . I do think it went fairly well. However, what I have to stress again [as she had in her midterm evaluation] is the degree to which [he must] keep struggling with how much [he] dominate[d] class discussion. It [points to] the need to interrogate the role [male] authority plays in the classroom.

The same woman followed the above statement with "every time someone raised their voice or disagreed with me . . . they were turning into my Dad."

In light of the very real "differences" gendering the seminar's race politics, one pivotally important way I determined to undermine identity politics of gender and race had to do with the way I privileged sexual difference around black lesbian subjectivity. During the first half of the semester, we read the groundbreaking fiction, poetry, and essays by black lesbian writers in Homegirls. Asserting black lesbian subjectivity as a revolutionary liberratory space in which to rethink heterosexist/racist/classist attitudes about womanhood, I privileged this location as a way for all of us to begin a reconsideration of our own gender, race, and sexual politics.

In the second half of the course, we concentrated on writings by black women outside the United States in the "Third World," Europe, and the Caribbean in Theorizing Black Feminisms, edited by Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, and Daughters of Africa, edited by Margaret Busby, texts that located themselves in a diasporic represen-
tation of black women/women of color. Many of the essays, stories, poems, and memoirs were by biracial and multiracial/multiethnic women, all in political struggle around women's movement. Discussing and writing about the contested identities these perspectives represented, we had begun a reconsideration of the ways our privileged location in the United States had provided us only one reality of women's lives globally. Reading international feminist texts by black women/women of color, we gained insight into the complex matrix of oppression that determined their lives.

Our understanding took on a much deeper resonance when my colleague M. Jacqui Alexander came to class to discuss one of her essays I had assigned on the status of women in the Caribbean. Having assigned "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas" for class discussion, I knew that the multilayered trajectory of its analysis would challenge us. As a black lesbian, Caribbean feminist, Alexander offered theoretical and critical perspectives that situated the reality of her identities and charged the seminar's dynamics in a way I had not witnessed before. Her political and scholarly relationship to the set of imperatives around which she writes coalesced in a powerfully moving way for the women (and myself) in the class session that day.

In Alexander's pedagogical performance, author, text, and teaching practice converged. I observed the thorough way she guided us through the text via chalkboard illustration, which made for a compelling display of "holistic" teaching. She engaged our minds, bodies, and spirit. Without diminishing the crucial importance of U.S. black women's critique of the simultaneity of oppression around race, class, and gender, Alexander strategically demonstrated how the interrelation of domination worked in the lives of Caribbean women at the intersection of sexuality. About the impact of postcolonial nation/state analysis, one woman had this to say:
One of the most interesting and intense readings we [did] this semester was M. Jacqui Alexander’s piece. . . . Although I was moved to think about many issues brought to light in this text, this piece really challenged my way of thinking along the lines of state and government . . . [as] expression[s] of ruling class interests . . . adjudicat[ing] on behalf of the ruling class only . . . [that] [t]he idea of consensus is manufactured. . . . This was interesting to me in that I had always thought these things myself, but never really had a name for it or could locate this way of thinking in an established body of thought. (italics added)

During that class session, observing Jacqui “acting out” the critical imperatives of her text in the typically self-possessed manner I have come to associate with her teaching style, I experienced the joy of learning from one’s comrade.

And in the End, Who Do I Think I Am Anyway?
Restating, Reaffirming, Re-imagining Education as a Liberatory Practice

As a feminist black man, over the span of my teaching career, I have developed a transgressive/risk-taking pedagogy. In the process, I have traversed the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality—to effect an approach to teaching African American literature governed by an ongoing commitment to foregrounding literary representations of black women’s struggle against sex and race oppression, patriarchy, and misogyny. At the juncture of race, gender, and sexuality, I have evolved feminist/antiracist teaching strategies in the classroom that clarify my personal and political struggle to build bridges across the contested spaces of the politics of identity, defying racial, sexual, class, and heterosexual mythologies of black women and men toward transformative ideas of gender and sexual relations.

In the context of an integrative model of feminist movement, my collegial, pedagogical, and scholarly relationship to Jacqui Alexander affirms the cross-gender comradeship bell hooks speaks of in Feminist
Theory: From Margin to Center, where women and men struggle together in feminist solidarity to end the sexual oppression of women. Thus, I teach the narratives of black women persecuted, sexually assaulted, and even killed because their lives do not fit into colonial, national, sexist, patriarchal, homophobic, unitary, and/or static ideas of womanhood—believing that their stories (in and outside of the United States) must be read and taught without censure. I hear the voices of these women telling me that their stories must be told, that I cannot be governed by the dictates of the politics of identity.

We have arrived at a moment of crucial urgency in the academy for those of us who educate as the practice of freedom. We know that crossing borders has been a question of life and death. In the stories of black women/women of color, the voices of the oppressed tell me that I have a political obligation to teach about them—their struggle, the battles they wage for liberation. Communicating this imperative to women represents the challenge of what I call a “border-crossing” pedagogy. Many women in the Redefining Womanhood course came to understand this at the end of the term. The same white woman student who wrote the comment above further stated,

I wonder sometimes what I [was] doing taking a course on black feminist theory. I wonder I [was] “culture surfing.” I doubt my reasons for [having] engag[ed] in such a dialogue. But then I read a text such as Jacqui Alexander’s or bell hooks’, and find myself thinking, “Yeah, right,” or “I’m so glad I’m not the only one who thought that,” or “I didn’t know that, but now something else makes sense to me,” and I know it [was] a good choice. Black feminist theory is not all about black feminists. If it were, where would it leave Gary [Lemons], as a black man? And why, when I can see parallels in my own experiences . . . within my own working-class white hometown, shouldn’t I use those experiences to build bridges between myself and those who are like-minded? Does one have to be a black woman to be engaged with black feminist theory? Hardly not.

More than simply coming up with “PC”-titled courses neatly cross-referenced under the rubrics of black, gender, feminist, and women’s
Young Man, Tell Our Stories of How We Made It Over

studies, I work across academic and political locations, representing a complex pedagogical practice that seeks not only to dislodge essentialist/reductive ideas about black women, but also to call out the patriarchal/sexiist/homophobic colonization of black men, manhood, and masculinity. My aim is twofold: (1) to invite students through the study of literature as cultural artifact to examine the universe of the text as one way of reading the "real" world text of human relations, toward a more just and humane society where all life is valued, and (2) to teach holistically, performing a pedagogical practice that honors the integral relationship among mind, body, and spirit. Such a standpoint requires a pedagogical practice located in a commitment to radically revisioning the classroom, where teachers and students effect border crossing as a liberatory strategy for learning. In this transformative space, as bell hooks has said, classrooms become "sites of resistance"—sites of intervention.

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