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Essentialism and Experience

Individual black women engaged in feminist movement, writing feminist theory, have persisted in our efforts to deconstruct the category "woman" and argued that gender is not the sole determinant of woman's identity. That this effort has succeeded can be measured not only by the extent to which feminist scholars have confronted questions of race and racism but by the emerging scholarship that looks at the intertwining of race and gender. Often it is forgotten that the hope was not simply that feminist scholars and activists would focus on race and gender but that they would do so in a manner that would not reinscribe conventional oppressive hierarchies. Particularly, it was seen as crucial to building mass-based feminist movement that theory would not be written in a manner that would further erase and exclude black women and women of color, or, worse yet, include us in subordinate positions. Unfortunately, much feminist scholarship dashes these hopes, largely because critics fail to interrogate the location from which they speak, often assuming, as it is now fashionable to do, that there is no

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need to question whether the perspective from which they write is informed by racist and sexist thinking, specifically as feminists perceive black women and women of color.

I was particularly reminded of this problem within feminist scholarship focusing on race and gender while reading Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. Intrigued by Fuss's discussion of current debates about essentialism and her problematizing of the issue, I was intellectually excited. Throughout much of the book she offers a brilliant analysis that allows critics to consider the positive possibilities of essentialism, even as she raises relevant critiques of its limitations. In my writing on the subject ("The Politics of Racial Black Subjectivity," "Post-Modern Blackness" in *Yearning*), though not as specifically focused on essentialism as the Fuss discussion, I concentrate on the ways critiques of essentialism have usefully deconstructed the idea of a monolithic homogeneous black identity and experience. I also discuss the way a totalizing critique of "subjectivity, essence, identity" can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one's identity as part of a struggle to challenge domination. *Essentially Speaking* provided me with a critical framework that added to my understanding of essentialism, yet halfway through the Fuss book I began to feel dismayed.

That dismay began with my reading of "Race' under Erasure? Poststructuralist Afro-American Literary Theory." Here, Fuss makes sweeping statements about African American literary criticism without offering any sense of the body of work she draws on to make her conclusions. Her pronouncements about the work of black feminist critics are particularly disturbing. Fuss asserts, "With the exception of the recent work of Hazel Carby and Hortense Spillers, black feminist critics have been reluctant to renounce essentialist critical positions and humanist literary practices." Curious to know what works would lend

themselves to this assessment, I was stunned to see Fuss cite only essays by Barbara Christian, Joyce Joyce, and Barbara Smith. While these individuals all do valuable literary criticism, they certainly do not represent all black feminist critics, particularly literary critics. Summing up her perspectives on black feminist writing in a few paragraphs, Fuss concentrates on black male literary critics Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, citing a significant body of their writings. It seems as though a racialized gender hierarchy is established in this chapter wherein the writing on "race" by black men is deemed worthier of in-depth study than the work of black women critics.

Her one-sentence dismissal and devaluation of work by most black feminist critics raises problematic questions. Since Fuss does not wish to examine work by black feminist critics comprehensively, it is difficult to grasp the intellectual groundwork forming the basis of her critique. Her comments on black feminist critics seem like additions to a critique that did not really start off including this work in its analysis. And as her reasons are not made explicit, I wonder why she needed to invoke the work of black feminist critics, and why she used it to place the work of Spillers and Carby in opposition to the writing of other black feminist critics. Writing from her perspective as a British black person from a West Indian background, Carby is by no means the first or only black woman critic, as Fuss suggests, to compel "us to interrogate the essentialism of traditional feminist historiography which posits a universalizing and hegemonizing notion of global sisterhood." If Carby's work is more convincing to Fuss than other writing by black feminists she has read (if indeed she has read a wide range of black feminist work; nothing in her comments or bibliography suggests that she has), she could have affirmed that appreciation without denigrating other black feminist critics. This cavalier treatment reminds me of the way the tokenism of black women in feminist scholarship and professional encounters takes on

dehumanizing forms. Black women are treated as though we are a box of chocolates presented to individual white women for their eating pleasure, so that they can decide for themselves and others which pieces are most tasty.

Ironically, even though Fuss praises the work of Carby and Spillers, it is not their work that is given extensive critical reading in this chapter. Indeed, she treats black women's subjectivity as a secondary issue. Such scholarship is permissible in an academic context that consistently marginalizes black women critics. I am always amazed by the complete absence of references to work by black women in contemporary critical works claiming to address in an inclusive way issues of gender, race, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on. Confronting colleagues about such absences, I, along with other black women critics, am often told that they were simply unaware that such material exists, that they were often working from their knowledge of available sources. Reading *Essentially Speaking*, I assumed Diana Fuss is either unfamiliar with the growing body of work by black feminist critics—particularly literary criticism—or that she excludes that work because she considers it unimportant. Clearly, she bases her assessment on the work she knows, rooting her analysis in experience. In the concluding chapter to her book, Fuss particularly criticizes using experience in the classroom as a base from which to espouse totalizing truths. Many of the limitations she points out could be easily applied to the way experience informs not only what we write about, but how we write about it, the judgments we make.

More than any other chapter in *Essentially Speaking*, this concluding essay is profoundly disturbing. It also undermines Fuss' previous insightful discussion of essentialism. Just as my experience of critical writing by black feminist thinkers would lead me to make different and certainly more complex assessments from those Fuss makes, my response to the chapter "Essentialism in the Classroom" is to some extent informed by

my different pedagogical experiences. This chapter provided me with a text I could engage dialectically; it served as a catalyst for clarifying my thoughts on essentialism in the classroom.

According to Fuss, issues of "essence, identity, and experience" erupt in the classroom primarily because of the critical input from marginalized groups. Throughout her chapter, whenever she offers an example of individuals who use essentialist standpoints to dominate discussion, to silence others via their invocation of the "authority of experience," they are members of groups who historically have been and are oppressed and exploited in this society. Fuss does not address how systems of domination already at work in the academy and the classroom silence the voices of individuals from marginalized groups and give space only when on the basis of experience it is demanded. She does not suggest that the very discursive practices that allow for the assertion of the "authority of experience" have already been determined by a politics of race, sex, and class domination. Fuss does not aggressively suggest that dominant groups—men, white people, heterosexuals—perpetuate essentialism. In her narrative it is always a marginal "other" who is essentialist. Yet the politics of essentialist exclusion as a means of asserting presence, identity, is a cultural practice that does not emerge solely from marginalized groups. And when those groups do employ essentialism as a way to dominate in institutional settings, they are often imitating paradigms for asserting subjectivity that are part of the controlling apparatus in structures of domination. Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this "authority" without their having to name the desire for it. They do not attend class

and say, "I think that I am superior intellectually to my classmates because I am white and male and that my experiences are much more important than any other group's." And yet their behavior often announces this way of thinking about identity, essence, subjectivity.

Why does Fuss's chapter ignore the subtle and overt ways essentialism is expressed from a location of privilege? Why does she primarily critique the misuses of essentialism by centering her analysis on marginalized groups? Doing so makes them the culprits for disrupting the classroom and making it an "unsafe" place. Is this not a conventional way the colonizer speaks of the colonized, the oppressor of the oppressed? Fuss asserts, "Problems often begin in the classroom when those 'in the know' commerce only with others 'in the know,' excluding and marginalizing those perceived to be outside the magic circle." This observation, which could certainly apply to any group, prefaces a focus on critical commentary by Edward Said that reinforces her critique of the dangers of essentialism. He appears in the text as resident "Third World authority" legitimating her argument. Critically echoing Said, Fuss comments: "For Said it is both dangerous and misleading to base an identity politics upon rigid theories of exclusions, 'exclusions that stipulate, for instance, only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience.'" I agree with Said's critique, but I reiterate that while I, too, critique the use of essentialism and identity politics as a strategy for exclusion or domination, I am suspicious when theories call this practice harmful as a way of suggesting that it is a strategy only marginalized groups employ. My suspicion is rooted in the awareness that a critique of essentialism that challenges only marginalized groups to interrogate their use of identity politics or an essentialist standpoint as a means of exerting coercive power leaves unquestioned the critical practices of other

groups who employ the same strategies in different ways and whose exclusionary behavior may be firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures of domination that do not critique or check it. At the same time, I am concerned that critiques of identity politics not serve as the new, chic way to silence students from marginal groups.

Fuss makes the point that "the artificial boundary between insider and outsider necessarily contains rather than disseminates knowledge." While I share this perception, I am disturbed that she never acknowledges that racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins. There is rarely any need for marginalized groups to bring this binary opposition into the classroom because it is usually already operating. They may simply use it in the service of their concerns. Looked at from a sympathetic standpoint, the assertion of an excluding essentialism on the part of students from marginalized groups can be a strategic response to domination and to colonization, a survival strategy that may indeed inhibit discussion even as it rescues those students from negation. Fuss argues that "it is the unspoken law of the classroom not to trust those who cannot cite experience as the indisputable grounds of their knowledge. Such unwritten laws pose perhaps the most serious threat to classroom dynamics in that they breed suspicion amongst those inside the circle and guilt (sometimes anger) amongst those outside the circle." Yet she does not discuss who makes these laws, who determines classroom dynamics. Does she perhaps assert her authority in a manner that unwittingly sets up a competitive dynamic by suggesting that the classroom *belongs* more to the professor than to the students, to some students more than others?

As a teacher, I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices

have been neither heard nor welcomed, whether these students discuss facts—those which any of us might know—or personal experience. My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality. If I do not wish to see these students use the “authority of experience” as a means of asserting voice, I can circumvent this possible misuse of power by bringing to the classroom pedagogical strategies that affirm their presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics. This pedagogical strategy is rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience. If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence. When I teach Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in introductory courses on black women writers, I assign students to write an autobiographical paragraph about an early racial memory. Each person reads that paragraph aloud to the class. Our collective listening to one another affirms the value and uniqueness of each voice. This exercise highlights experience without privileging the voices of students from any particular group. It helps create a communal awareness of the diversity of our experiences and provides a limited sense of the experiences that may inform how we think and what we say. Since this exercise makes the classroom a space where experience is valued, not negated or deemed meaningless, students seem less inclined to make the telling of experience that site where they compete for voice, if indeed such a competition is taking place. In our classroom, students do not usually feel the need to compete because the concept of a privileged voice of authority is deconstructed by our collective critical practice.

In the chapter “Essentialism in the Classroom” Fuss centers her discussion on locating a particular voice of authority. Here it is her voice. When she raises the question “how are we to han-

dle” students, her use of the word “handle” suggests images of manipulation. And her use of a collective “we” implies a sense of a unified pedagogical practice shared by other professors. In the institutions where I have taught, the prevailing pedagogical model is authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one where the voice of the professor is the “privileged” transmitter of knowledge. Usually these professors devalue including personal experience in classroom discussion. Fuss admits to being wary of attempts to censor the telling of personal histories in the classroom on the basis that they have not been “adequately ‘theorized,’” but she indicates throughout this chapter that on a fundamental level she does not believe that the sharing of personal experience can be a meaningful addition to classroom discussions. If this bias informs her pedagogy, it is not surprising that invocations of experience are used aggressively to assert a privileged way of knowing, whether against her or other students. If a professor’s pedagogy is not liberatory, then students will probably not compete for value and voice in the classroom. That essentialist standpoints are used competitively does not mean that the taking of those positions creates the situation of conflict.

Fuss’s experiences in the classroom may reflect the way in which “competition for voice” is an integral part of her pedagogical practice. Most of the comments and observations she makes about essentialism in the classroom are based on her experience (and perhaps that of her colleagues, though this is not explicit). Based on that experience she can confidently assert that she “remain[s] convinced that appeals to the authority of experience rarely advance discussion and frequently provoke confusion.” To emphasize this point further she says, “I am always struck by the way in which introductions of experiential truths into classroom debates dead-end the discussion.” Fuss draws on her particular experience to make totalizing generalizations. Like her, I have seen the way essentialist stand-

points can be used to silence or assert authority over the opposition, but I most often see and experience the way the telling of personal experience is incorporated into classrooms in ways that deepen discussion. And I am most thrilled when the telling of experience links discussions of facts or more abstract constructs to concrete reality. My experience in the classroom may be different from Fuss's because I speak as an institutionally marginalized other, and here I do not mean to assume an essentialist position. There are many black women professors who would not claim this location. The majority of students who enter our classrooms have never been taught by black women professors. My pedagogy is informed by this knowledge, because I know from experience that this unfamiliarity can overdetermine what takes place in the classroom. Also, knowing from personal experience as a student in predominantly white institutions how easy it is to feel shut out or closed down, I am particularly eager to help create a learning process in the classroom that engages everyone. Therefore, biases imposed by essentialist standpoints or identity politics, alongside those perspectives that insist that experience has no place in the classroom (both stances can create an atmosphere of coercion and exclusion), must be interrogated by pedagogical practices. Pedagogical strategies can determine the extent to which all students learn to engage more fully the ideas and issues that seem to have no direct relation to their experience.

Fuss does not suggest that teachers who are aware of the multiple ways essentialist standpoints can be used to shut down discussion can construct a pedagogy that critically intervenes before one group attempts to silence another. Professors, especially those from dominant groups, may themselves employ essentialist notions to constrain the voices of particular students; hence we must all be ever-vigilant in our pedagogical practices. Whenever students share with me the sense that my pedagogical practices are silencing them, I have to examine

that process critically. Even though Fuss grudgingly acknowledges that the telling of experience in the classroom may have some positive implications, her admission is quite patronizing:

while truth clearly does not equate with experience, it cannot be denied that it is precisely the fiction that they are the same which prompts many students, who would not perhaps speak otherwise, to enter energetically into those debates they perceive as pertaining directly to them. The authority of experience, in other words, not only works to silence students, it also works to empower them. How are we to negotiate the gap between the conservative fiction of experience as the ground of all truth-knowledge and the immense power of this fiction to enable ^{and} encourage student participation?

All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them (when non-white students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience it is not aberrant behavior). Students may be well versed in a particular subject and yet be more inclined to speak confidently if that subject directly relates to their experience. Again, it must be remembered that there are students who may not feel the need to acknowledge that their enthusiastic participation is sparked by the connection of that discussion to personal experience.

In the introductory paragraph to "Essentialism in the Classroom" Fuss asks, "Exactly what counts as 'experience,' and should we defer to it in pedagogical situations?" Framing the question in this way makes it appear that comments about experiences necessarily disrupt the classroom, engaging the professor and students in a struggle for authority that can be mediated if the professor defers. This question, however, could be posed in a manner that would not imply a condescending

devaluation of experience. We might ask: How can professors and students who want to share personal experience in the classroom do so without promoting essentialist standpoints that exclude? Often when professors affirm the importance of experience students feel less need to insist that it is a privileged way of knowing. Henry Giroux, in his writing on critical pedagogy, suggests that "the notion of experience has to be situated within a theory of learning." Giroux suggests that professors must learn to respect the way students feel about their experiences as well as their need to speak about them in classroom settings: "You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it." Usually it is in a context where the experiential knowledge of students is being denied or negated that they may feel most determined to impress upon listeners both its value and its superiority to other ways of knowing.

Unlike Fuss, I have not been in classrooms where students find "empirical ways of knowing analytically suspect." I have taught feminist theory classes where students express rage against work that does not clarify its relationship to concrete experience, that does not engage feminist praxis in an intelligible way. Student frustration is directed against the inability of methodology, analysis, and abstract writing (usually blamed on the material and often justifiably so) to make the work connect to their efforts to live more fully, to transform society, to live a politics of feminism.

Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and mean-

ing to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process. Skeptically, Fuss asks, "Does experience of oppression confer special jurisdiction over the right to speak about that oppression?" This is a question that she does not answer. Were it posed to me by students in the classroom, I would ask them to consider whether there is any "special" knowledge to be acquired by hearing oppressed individuals speak from their experience—whether it be of victimization or resistance—that might make one want to create a privileged space for such discussion. ¹⁴ Then we might explore ways individuals acquire knowledge about an experience they have not lived, asking ourselves what moral questions are raised when they speak for or about a reality that they do not know experientially, especially if they are speaking about an oppressed group. In classrooms that have been extremely diverse, where I have endeavored to teach material about exploited groups who are not black, I have suggested that if I bring to the class only analytical ways of knowing and someone else brings personal experience, I welcome that knowledge because it will enhance our learning. Also, I share with the class my conviction that if my knowledge is limited, and if someone else brings a combination of facts and experience, then I humble myself and respectfully learn from those who bring this great gift. I can do this without negating the position of authority professors have, since fundamentally I believe that combining the analytical and experiential is a richer way of knowing.

Years ago, I was thankful to discover the phrase "the authority of experience" in feminist writing because it gave me a name for what I brought to feminist classrooms that I thought was not present but believed was valuable. As an undergraduate in feminist classrooms where woman's experience was universalized, I knew from my experience as a black female that black

women's reality was being excluded. I spoke from that knowledge. There was no body of theory to invoke that would substantiate this truth claim. No one really wanted to hear about the deconstruction of woman as a category of analysis then. Insisting on the value of my experience was crucial to gaining a hearing. Certainly, the need to understand my experience motivated me as an undergraduate to write *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*.

Now I am troubled by the term "authority of experience," acutely aware of the way it is used to silence and exclude. Yet I want to have a phrase that affirms the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience. I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory. For example, I am disturbed when all the courses on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently. Truthfully, if I had been given the opportunity to study African American critical thought from a progressive black professor instead of the progressive white woman with whom I studied as a first-year student, I would have chosen the black person. Although I learned a great deal from this white woman professor, I sincerely believe that I would have learned even more from a progressive black professor, because this individual would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing—that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality. To me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the "authority of experience" but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.

Often experience enters the classroom from the location of memory. Usually narratives of experience are told retrospectively. In the testimony of Guatemalan peasant and activist Rigoberta Menchú, I hear the passion of remembrance in her words:

My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother's words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be change, and there would be no victory. She was as clear about this as if she were a woman with all sorts of theories and a lot of practice.

I know that I can take this knowledge and transmit the message of her words. Their meaning could be easily conveyed. What would be lost in the transmission is the spirit that orders those words, that testifies that, behind them—underneath, every where—there is a lived reality. When I use the phrase "passion of experience," it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know. In the classroom, I share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively. Sometimes, I tell students, it is like a recipe. I tell them to imagine we are baking bread that needs flour. And we have all the other ingredients but no flour. Suddenly, the flour becomes

most important even though it alone will not do. This is a way to think about experience in the classroom.

On another day, I might ask students to ponder what we want to make happen in the class, to name what we hope to know, what might be most useful. I ask them what standpoint is a personal experience. Then there are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountaintop and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountaintop is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.

7

Holding My Sister's Hand

Feminist Solidarity

"Feminism must be on the cutting edge of real social change if it is to survive as a movement in any particular country."

—Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

"We are the victims of our History and our Present. They place too many obstacles in the Way of Love. And we cannot enjoy even our differences in peace."

—Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*

Patriarchal perspectives on race relations have traditionally evoked the image of black men gaining the freedom to be sexual with white women as that personal relationship which best exemplifies the connection between public struggle for racial equality and the private politics of racial intimacy. Racist fears that socially sanctioned romantic relationships between black

might have begun, "As a white woman reading Toni Morrison's *Sula*, I was..." Such a position would allow white women scholars to share their ideas about black women's writing (or any group of women's writing) without assuming that their thoughts would be seen as "definitive" or that they would be trying to be "the authority." Again, I can only reiterate a point made throughout this piece, that problems arise not when white women choose to write about the experiences of non-white people, but when such material is presented as "authoritative."

Cross-ethnic feminist scholarship should emphasize the value of a scholar's work as well as the unique perspective that scholar brings to bear on the subject. I do not wish for a situation where only black women are encouraged to write about issues related to black female experience. I do, however, wish to help make a world wherein scholarship and work by black women is valued so that we will be motivated to do such work, so that our voices will be heard. I wish to help make a world where our work will be taken seriously, given appreciation, and acclaimed, a world in which such work will be seen as necessary and significant.

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toward a revolutionary feminist pedagogy

My favorite teacher in high school was Miss Annie Mae Moore, a short, stout black woman. She had taught my mama and her sisters. She could tell story after story about their fast ways, their wildness. She could tell me ways I was like mama, ways I was most truly my own self. She could catch hold of you and turn you around, set you straight (these were the comments folk made about her teaching)—so that we would know what we were facing when we entered her classroom. Passionate in her teaching, confident that her work in life was a pedagogy of liberation (words she would not have used but lived instinctively), one that would address and confront our realities as black children growing up in the segregated South, black children growing up within a white-supremacist culture. Miss Moore knew that if we were to be fully self-realized, then her work, and the work of all our progressive teachers, was not to teach us solely the knowledge in books, but to teach us an oppositional world view—different from that of our exploiters and oppressors, a world view that would enable us to see ourselves not through the lens of racism or racist stereotypes but one that would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly, to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically—analytically—to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit.

It was as a student in segregated black schools called Booker T. Washington and Crispus Attucks that I witnessed the transformative power of teaching, of pedagogy. In particular, those teachers who approached their work as though it was indeed a pedagogy, a science of teaching, requiring diverse strategies, approaches, explorations, experimentation, and risks, demonstrated the value—the political power—of teaching. Their work was truly education for critical consciousness. In these segregated schools, the teachers were almost all black women. Many of them had chosen teaching at a historical moment when they were required by custom to remain single and childless, to have no visible erotic or sexual life. Among them were exceptional teachers who gave to their work a passion, a devotion that made it seem a true calling, a true vocation. They were the teachers who conceptualized oppositional world views, who taught us young black women to exult and glory in the power and beauty of our intellect. They offered to us a legacy of liberatory pedagogy that demanded active resistance and rebellion against sexism and racism. They embodied in their work, in their lives (for none of them appeared as tortured spinsters estranged and alienated from the world around them) a feminist spirit. They were active participants in black community, shaping our futures, mapping our intellectual terrains, sharing revolutionary fervor and vision. I write these words, this essay to express the honor and respect I have for them because they have been my pedagogical guardians. Their work has had a profound impact on my consciousness, on my development as a teacher.

During years of graduate school, I waited for that phase of study when we would focus on the meaning and significance of pedagogy, when we would learn about teaching, about how to teach. That moment never arrived. For years I have relied on those earlier models of excellent teaching to guide me. Most specifically, I understood from the teachers in those segregated schools that the work of any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students was necessarily and fundamentally radical, that ideas were not neutral, that to teach in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens, is to challenge domination at its very core. It is this pedagogy that Paulo Freire calls “education as the practice of freedom.” In his introduction to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull writes:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

A liberatory feminist movement aims to transform society by eradicating patriarchy, by ending sexism and sexist oppression, by challenging the politics of domination on all fronts. Feminist pedagogy can only be

liberatory if it is truly revolutionary because the mechanisms of appropriation within white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy are able to co-opt with tremendous ease that which merely appears radical or subversive. Within the United States, contemporary feminist movement is sustained in part by the efforts academic women make to constitute the university setting as a central site for the development and dissemination of feminist thought. Women’s Studies has been the location of this effort. Given the way universities work to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo, the way knowledge is offered as commodity, Women’s Studies can easily become a place where revolutionary feminist thought and feminist activism are submerged or made secondary to the goals of academic careerism. Without diminishing in any way our struggle as academics striving to succeed in institutions, such effort is fully compatible with liberatory feminist struggle only when we consciously, carefully, and strategically link the two. When this connection is made initially but not sustained, or when it is never evident, Women’s Studies becomes either an exotic terrain for those politically chic few seeking affirmation or a small settlement within the larger institutional structure where women (and primarily white women) have a power base, which rather than being oppositional simply mirrors the status quo. When feminist struggle is the central foundation for feminist education, Women’s Studies and the feminist classroom (which can exist outside the domain of Women’s Studies) can be places where education is the practice of freedom, the place for liberatory pedagogy.

At this historical moment, there is a crisis of engagement within universities, for when knowledge becomes commoditized, then much authentic learning ceases. Students who want to learn hunger for a space where they can be challenged intellectually. Students also suffer, as many of us who teach do, from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life, unsure even about whether it is important to stay alive. They long for a context where their subjective needs can be integrated with study, where the primary focus is a broader spectrum of ideas and modes of inquiry, in short a dialectical context where there is serious and rigorous critical exchange. This is an important and exciting time for feminist pedagogy because in theory and practice our work meets these needs.

Feminist education—the feminist classroom—is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgement of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university. Most importantly, feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world “more rather than less real.” In my classrooms, we work to dispel the notion that our experience is not a “real world” experience. This is especially easy since gender is such a pressing issue in contemporary life. Every aspect of popular culture alerts us to the reality that folks are thinking about gender in both reactionary and progressive ways. What

is important is that they are thinking critically. And it is this space that allows for the possibility of feminist intervention, whether it be in our classroom or in the life of students outside the classroom. Lately, there has been a truly diverse body of students coming to my classes and other feminist classes at universities all around the United States. Many of us have been wondering "what's going on" or "why are all these men, and white men in the class." This changing student body reflects the concern about gender issues, that it is one of the real important issues in people's private lives that is addressed academically. Freire writes, "Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that we are abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from us."

To make a revolutionary feminist pedagogy, we must relinquish our ties to traditional ways of teaching that reinforce domination. This is very difficult. Women's Studies courses are often viewed as not seriously academic because so much "personal stuff" is discussed. Fear that their courses will be seen as "gut" classes has led many feminist professors to rely more on traditional pedagogical styles. This is unfortunate. Certainly, the radical alternative to the status quo should never have been simply an inversion. That is to say, critical of the absence of any focus on personal experience in traditional classrooms, such focus becomes the central characteristic of the feminist classroom. This model must be viewed critically because a class can still be reinforcing domination, not transforming consciousness about gender, even as the "personal" is the ongoing topic of conversation.

To have a revolutionary feminist pedagogy we must first focus on the teacher-student relationship and the issue of power. How do we as feminist teachers use power in a way that is not coercive, dominating? Many women have had difficulty asserting power in the feminist classroom for fear that to do so would be to exercise domination. Yet we must acknowledge that our role as teacher is a position of power over others. We can use that power in ways that diminish or in ways that enrich and it is this choice that should distinguish feminist pedagogy from ways of teaching that reinforce domination. One simple way to alter the way one's "power" as teacher is experienced in the classroom is to elect not to assume the posture of all-knowing professors. This is also difficult. When we acknowledge that we do not know everything, that we do not have all the answers, we risk students leaving our classrooms and telling others that we are not prepared. It is important to make it clear to students that we are prepared and that the willingness to be open and honest about what we do not know is a gesture of respect for them.

To be oppositional in the feminist classroom one must have a standard of valuation that differs from the norm. Many of us tried new ways of teaching without changing the standards by which we evaluated our work. We often left the classroom feeling uncertain about the learning process

or even concerned that we were failing as teachers. Let me share a particular problem I have faced. My classroom style is very confrontational. It is a model of pedagogy that is based on the assumption that many students will take courses from me who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice. Unlike the stereotypical feminist model that suggests women best come to voice in an atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. Many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding. They do not usually come away from my class talking about how much they enjoyed the experience.

One aspect of traditional models of teaching I had not surrendered was that longing for immediate recognition of my value as a teacher, and immediate affirmation. Often I did not feel liked or affirmed and this was difficult for me to accept. I reflected on my student experiences and the reality that I often learned the most in classes that I did not enjoy and complained about, which helped me to work on the traditional assumption that immediate positive feedback is the signifier of worth. Concurrently, I found that students who often felt they hated a class with me would return later to say how much they learned, that they understood that it was the different style that made it hard as well as the different demands. I began to see that courses that work to shift paradigms, to change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe and this was not a worthwhile criteria to use in evaluation.

In the feminist classroom, it is important to define the terms of engagement, to identify what we mean when we say that a course will be taught from a feminist perspective. Often the initial explanations about pedagogy will have a serious impact on the way students experience a course. It is important to talk about pedagogical strategy. For a time, I assumed that students would just get the hang of it, would see that I was trying to teach in a different way and accept it without explanation. Often, that meant I explained after being criticized. It is important for feminist professors to openly acknowledge that students must consider whether they wish to be in such a learning space. On a basic level, students are often turned off by the fact that I take attendance, but because I see the classroom experience as constituting a unique learning experience, to miss class is to really lose a significant aspect of the process. Whether or not a student attends class affects grading and this bothers students who are not accustomed to taking attendance seriously. Another important issue for me has been that each student participate in classroom discussion, that each student have a voice.

This is a practice I think is important not because every student has something valuable to say (this is not always so), but often students who do have meaningful comments to contribute are silent. In my classes, everyone's voice is heard as students read paragraphs which may explore a particular issue. They do not have the opportunity to refuse to read paragraphs. When I hear their voices, I become more aware of information they may not know that I can provide. Whether a class is large or small, I try to talk with all students individually or in small groups so that I have a sense of their needs. How can we transform consciousness if we do not have some sense of where the students are intellectually, psychically?

Concern with how and what students are learning validates and legitimizes a focus, however small, on personal confession in classroom discussions. I encourage students to relate the information they are learning to the personal identities they are working to socially construct, to change, to affirm. If the goal of personal confession is not narcissism, it must take place within a critical framework where it is related to material that is being discussed. When, for example, I am teaching Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, I may have students write personal paragraphs about the relationship between race and physical beauty, which they read in class. Their paragraphs may reveal pain, woundedness as they explore and express ways they are victimized by racism and sexism, or they may express ideas that are racist and sexist. Yet the paragraphs enable them to approach the text in a new way. They may read the novel differently. They may be able to be more critical and analytical. If this does not happen, then the paragraphs fail as a pedagogical tool. To make feminist classrooms the site of transformative learning experiences, we must constantly try new methods, new approaches.

Finally, we cannot have a revolutionary feminist pedagogy if we do not have revolutionary feminists in the classroom. Women's Studies courses must do more than offer a different teaching style; we must really challenge issues of sexism and sexist oppression both by what we teach and how we teach. This is truly a collective effort. We must learn from one another, sharing ideas and pedagogical strategies. Although I have invited feminist colleagues to come and participate in my classes, they do not. Classroom territoriality is another traditional taboo. Yet if we are to learn from one another, if we are to develop a concrete strategy for radicalizing our classrooms, we must be more engaged as a group. We must be willing to deconstruct this power dimension, to challenge, change, and create new approaches. If we are to move toward a revolutionary feminist pedagogy, we must challenge ourselves and one another to restore to feminist struggle its radical and subversive dimension. We must be willing to restore the spirit of risk—to be fast, wild, to be able to take hold, turn around, transform.

black and female: reflections on graduate school

Searching for material to read in a class about women and race, I found an essay in *Heresies: Racism is the Issue* that fascinated me. I realized that it was one of the first written discussions of the struggles black English majors (and particularly black women) face when we study at predominately white universities. The essay, "On Becoming A Feminist Writer," is by Carole Gregory. She begins by explaining that she has been raised in racially segregated neighborhoods but that no one had ever really explained "white racism or white male sexism." Psychically, she was not prepared to confront head-on these aspects of social reality, yet they were made visible as soon as she registered for classes:

Chewing on a brown pipe, a white professor said, "English departments do not hire Negroes or women!" Like a guillotine, his voice sought to take my head off. Racism in my hometown was an economic code of etiquette which stifled Negroes and women.

"If you are supposed to explain these courses, that's all I want," I answered. Yet I wanted to kill this man. Only my conditioning as a female kept me from striking his volcanic red face. My murderous impulses were raging.

Her essay chronicles her struggles to pursue a discipline which interests her without allowing racism or sexism to defeat and destroy her intellec-

tual curiosity, her desire to teach. The words of this white male American literature professor echo in her mind years later when she finds employment difficult; when she confronts the reality that black university teachers of English are rare. Although she is writing in 1982, she concludes her essay with the comment:

Many years ago, an American literature professor had cursed the destiny of "Negroes and women." There was truth in his ugly words. Have you ever had a Black woman for an English teacher in the North? Few of us are able to earn a living. For the past few years, I have worked as an adjunct in English. Teaching brings me great satisfaction; starving does not.... I still remember the red color of the face which said, "English departments do not hire Negroes or women." Can women change this indictment? These are the fragments I add to my journal.

Reading Carole Gregory's essay, I recalled that in all my years of studying in English department classes, I had never been taught by a black woman. In my years of teaching, I have encountered students both in English classes and other disciplines who have never been taught by black women. Raised in segregated schools until my sophomore year of high school, I had wonderful black women teachers as role models. It never occurred to me that I would not find them in university classrooms. Yet I studied at four universities—Stanford, University of Wisconsin, University of Southern California, and the University of California, Santa Cruz—and I did not once have the opportunity to study with a black woman English professor. They were never members of the faculty. I considered myself lucky to study with one black male professor at Stanford who was visiting and another at the University of Southern California even though both were reluctant to support and encourage black female students. Despite their sexism and internalized racism, I appreciated them as teachers and felt they affirmed that black scholars could teach literature, could work in English departments. They offered a degree of support and affirmation, however relative, that countered the intense racism and sexism of many white professors.

Changing hiring practices have meant that there are increasingly more black professors in predominately white universities, but their presence only mediates in a minor way the racism and sexism of white professors. During my graduate school years, I dreaded talking face-to-face with white professors, especially white males. I had not developed this dread as an undergraduate because there it was simply assumed that black students, and particularly black female students, were not bright enough to make it in graduate school. While these racist and sexist opinions were rarely directly stated, the message was conveyed through various humiliations that were aimed at shaming students, at breaking our spirit. We were terrorized. As an undergraduate, I carefully avoided those professors who made it clear that the presence of any black students in their classes was not desired.

Unlike Carole Gregory's first encounter, they did not make direct racist statements. Instead, they communicated their message in subtle ways—forgetting to call your name when reading the roll, avoiding looking at you, pretending they do not hear you when you speak, and at times ignoring you altogether.

The first time this happened to me I was puzzled and frightened. It was clear to me and all the other white students that the professor, a white male, was directing aggressive mistreatment solely at me. These other students shared with me that it was not likely that I would pass the class no matter how good my work, that the professor would find something wrong with it. They never suggested that this treatment was informed by racism and sexism; it was just that the professor had for whatever "unapparent" reason decided to dislike me. Of course, there were rare occasions when taking a course meant so much to me that I tried to confront racism, to talk with the professor; and there were required courses. Whenever I tried to talk with professors about racism, they always denied any culpability. Often I was told, "I don't even notice that you are black."

In graduate school, it was especially hard to choose courses that would not be taught by professors who were quite racist. Even though one could resist by naming the problem and confronting the person, it was rarely possible to find anyone who could take such accusations seriously. Individual white professors were supported by white-supremacist institutions, by racist colleagues, by hierarchies that placed the word of the professor above that of the student. When I would tell the more supportive professors about racist comments that were said behind closed doors, during office hours, there would always be an expression of disbelief, surprise, and suspicion about the accuracy of what I was reporting. Most likely they listened because they felt it was their liberal duty to do so. Their disbelief, their refusal to take responsibility for white racism made it impossible for them to show authentic concern or help. One professor of 18th century literature by white writers invited me to his office to tell me that he would personally see to it that I would never receive a graduate degree. I, like many other students in the class, had written a paper in a style that he disapproved of, yet only I was given this response. It was often in the very areas of British and American literature where racism abounds in the texts studied that I would encounter racist individuals.

Gradually, I began to shift my interest in early American literature to more modern and contemporary works. This shift was influenced greatly by an encounter with a white male professor of American literature whose racism and sexism was unchecked. In his classes, I, as well as other students, was subjected to racist and sexist jokes. Any of us that he considered should not be in graduate school were the objects of particular scorn and ridicule. When we gave oral presentations, we were told our work was stupid, pathetic, and were not allowed to finish. If we resisted in any way, the situation worsened. When I went to speak with him about his attitude,

I was told that I was not really graduate school material, that I should drop out. My anger surfaced and I began to shout, to cry. I remember yelling wildly, "Do you love me? And if you don't love me then how can you have any insight about my concerns and abilities? And who are you to make such suggestions on the basis of one class." He of course was not making a suggestion. His was a course one had to pass to graduate. He was telling me that I could avoid the systematic abuse by simply dropping out. I would not drop out. I continued to work even though it was clear that I would not succeed, even as the persecution became more intense. And even though I constantly resisted.

In time, my spirits were more and more depressed. I began to dream of entering the professor's office with a loaded gun. There I would demand that he listen, that he experience the fear, the humiliation. In my dreams I could hear his pleading voice begging me not to shoot, to remain calm. As soon as I put the gun down he would become his old self again. Ultimately in the dream the only answer was to shoot, to shoot to kill. When this dream became so consistently a part of my waking fantasies, I knew that it was time for me to take a break from graduate school. Even so I felt as though his terrorism had succeeded, that he had indeed broken my spirit. It was this feeling that led me to return to graduate school, to his classes, because I felt I had given him too much power over me and I needed to regain that sense of self and personal integrity that I allowed him to diminish. Through much of my graduate school career, I was told that "I did not have the proper demeanor of a graduate student." In one graduate program, the black woman before me, who was also subjected to racist and sexist aggression, would tell me that they would say she was not as smart as me but she knew her place. I did not know my place. Young white radicals began to use the phrase "student as nigger" precisely to call attention to the way in which hierarchies within universities encouraged domination of the powerless by the powerful. At many universities the proper demeanor of a graduate student is exemplary when that student is obedient, when he or she does not challenge or resist authority.

During graduate school, white students would tell me that it was important not to question, challenge, or resist. Their tolerance level seemed much higher than my own or that of other black students. Critically reflecting on the differences between us, it was apparent that many of the white students were from privileged class backgrounds. Tolerating the humiliations and degradations we were subjected to in graduate school did not radically call into question their integrity, their sense of self-worth. Those of us who were coming from underprivileged class backgrounds, who were black, often were able to attend college only because we had consistently defied those who had attempted to make us believe we were smart but not "smart enough"; guidance counselors who refused to tell us about certain colleges because they already knew we would not be accepted; parents who were not necessarily supportive of graduate work, etc. White students

were not living daily in a world outside campus life where they also had to resist degradation, humiliation. To them, tolerating forms of exploitation and domination in graduate school did not evoke images of a lifetime spent tolerating abuse. They would endure certain forms of domination and abuse, accepting it as an initiation process that would conclude when they became the person in power. In some ways they regarded graduate school and its many humiliations as a game, and they submitted to playing the role of subordinate. I and many other students, especially non-white students from non-privileged backgrounds, were unable to accept and play this "game." Often we were ambivalent about the rewards promised. Many of us were not seeking to be in a position of power over others. Though we wished to teach, we did not want to exert coercive authoritarian rule over others. Clearly those students who played the game best were usually white males and they did not face discrimination, exploitation, and abuse in many other areas of their lives.

Many black graduate students I knew were concerned about whether we were striving to participate in structures of domination and were uncertain about whether we could assume positions of authority. We could not envision assuming oppressive roles. For some of us, failure, failing, being failed began to look like a positive alternative, a way out, a solution. This was especially true for those students who felt they were suffering mentally, who felt that they would never be able to recover a sense of wholeness or well-being. In recent years, campus awareness of the absence of support for international students who have many conflicts and dilemmas in an environment that does not acknowledge their cultural codes has led to the development of support networks. Yet there has been little recognition that there are black students and other non-white students who suffer similar problems, who come from backgrounds where we learned different cultural codes. For example, we may learn that it is important not to accept coercive authoritarian rule from someone who is not a family elder—hence we may have difficulties accepting strangers assuming such a role.

Not long ago, I was at a small party with faculty from a major liberal California university, which until recently had no black professors in the English department who were permanent staff, though they were sometimes visiting scholars. One non-white faculty member and myself began to talk about the problems facing black graduate students studying in English departments. We joked about the racism within English departments, commenting that other disciplines were slightly more willing to accept study of the lives and works of non-white people yet such work is rarely affirmed in English departments where the study of literature usually consists of many works by white men and a few by white women. We talked about how some departments were struggling to change. Speaking about his department, he commented that they have only a few black graduate students, sometimes none, that at one time two black students,

one male and one female, had been accepted and both had serious mental health problems. At departmental meetings, white faculty suggested that this indicated that black students just did not have the wherewithal to succeed in this graduate program. For a time, no black students were admitted. His story revealed that part of the burden these students may have felt, which many of us have felt, is that our performance will have future implications for all black students and this knowledge heightens one's performance anxiety from the very beginning. Unfortunately, racist biases often lead departments to see the behavior of one black student as an indication of the way all black students will perform academically. Certainly, if individual white students have difficulty adjusting or succeeding within a graduate program, it is not seen as an indication that all other white students will fail.

The combined forces of racism and sexism often make the black female graduate experience differ in kind from that of the black male experience. While he may be subjected to racial biases, his maleness may serve to mediate the extent to which he will be attacked, dominated, etc. Often it is assumed that black males are better able to succeed at graduate school in English than black females. While many white scholars may be aware of a black male intellectual tradition, they rarely know about black female intellectuals. African-American intellectual traditions, like those of white people, have been male-dominated. People who know the names of W.E.B. Dubois or Martin Delaney may have never heard of Mary Church Terrell or Anna Cooper. The small numbers of black women in permanent positions in academic institutions do not constitute a significant presence, one strong enough to challenge racist and sexist biases. Often the only black woman white professors have encountered is a domestic worker in their home. Yet there are no sociological studies that I know of which examine whether a group who has been seen as not having intellectual capability will automatically be accorded respect and recognition if they enter positions that suggest they are representative scholars. Often black women are such an "invisible presence" on campuses that many students may not be aware that any black women teach at the universities they attend.

Given the reality of racism and sexism, being awarded advanced degrees does not mean that black women will achieve equity with black men or other groups in the profession. Full-time, non-white women comprise less than 3 percent of the total faculty on most campuses. Racism and sexism, particularly on the graduate level, shape and influence both the academic performance and employment of black female academics. During my years of graduate work in English, I was often faced with the hostility of white students who felt that because I was black and female I would have no trouble finding a job. This was usually the response from professors as well if I expressed fear of not finding employment. Ironically, no one ever acknowledged that we were never taught by any of these black

women who were taking all the jobs. No one wanted to see that perhaps racism and sexism militate against the hiring of black women even though we are seen as a group that will be given priority, preferential status. Such assumptions, which are usually rooted in the logic of affirmative action hiring, do not include recognition of the ways most universities do not strive to attain diversity of faculty and that often diversity means hiring one non-white person, one black person. When I and other black women graduate students surveyed English departments in the United States, we did not see masses of black women and rightly felt concerned about our futures.

Moving around often, I attended several graduate schools but finally finished my work at the University of California, Santa Cruz where I found support despite the prevalence of racism and sexism. Since I had much past experience, I was able to talk with white faculty members before entering the program about whether they would be receptive and supportive of my desire to focus on African-American writers. I was given positive reassurance that proved accurate. More and more, there are university settings where black female graduate students and black graduate students can study in supportive atmospheres. Racism and sexism are always present yet they do not necessarily shape all areas of graduate experience. When I talk with black female graduate students working in English departments, I hear that many of the problems have not changed, that they experience the same intense isolation and loneliness that characterized my experience. This is why I think it is important that black women in higher education write and talk about our experiences, about survival strategies. When I was having a very difficult time, I read *Working It Out*. Despite the fact that the academics who described the way in which sexism had shaped their academic experience in graduate school were white women, I was encouraged by their resistance, by their perseverance, by their success. Reading their stories helped me to feel less alone. I wrote this essay because of the many conversations I have had with black female graduate students who despair, who are frustrated, who are fearful that the experiences they are having are unique. I want them to know that they are not alone, that the problems that arise, the obstacles created by racism and sexism are real—that they do exist—they do hurt but they are not insurmountable. Perhaps these words will give solace, will intensify their courage, and renew their spirit.