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Loving Blackness: A Sense Experience

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Loving Blackness: A Sense Experience

Introduction and Rationale

bell hooks' scholarship and activism teach us what a loving ethic is—a dialogic engagement and embrace of just political ideas, desires, and social intentions and interactions in service of social equity. hooks' scholarship on loving ethic is grounded in sense experiences that provide a context from which people can practice a learning ethic aligning with a set of senses including a feeling that is internally and physically felt through the body. A loving ethic additionally works in service to minoritarian people who navigate what Collins (2000) calls a *matrix of domination*. Matrices of domination often condition multiple spheres of American life, including politics, religion and spirituality, labor, and our intimate relationships (Terpe, 2020). To embrace a loving ethic, then, is to pause for a moment and consider social possibilities and futurities that our loved ones may not/cannot imagine, *yet*, due to our necessary commitment to material advancements for survival under a capitalist state and its logics that necessitate its commitment. This is an invitation to explore what I call a sense experience.

A sense experience is an exercise that requires an understanding of Black feminist theories to understand feminisms' divisive movements and moments to advocate for necessary changes where the well-being of humanity is paramount. A sense experience is also a history making exercise that sidesteps mainstream history that is devoid of a will to show care and cooperate with Black women and Black feminisms. A sense experience additionally indexes a host of Black feminist sensibilities *by* and *for* the Black/African diaspora. These sensibilities include reactive capacities that integrate all dimensions of love, including care, honesty, integrity, and knowledge (hooks, 2000). These sensibilities are un/seen, un/felt, un/heard, un/touched, and un/tasted. I will discuss Horsley's (2022) sense theory which is grounded in an erotic of tasting that is sexual and political. Horsley's sense theory is indicative of sense experiences that advance Black, queer, and sexuality studies in a way that is rooted in hooks' execution of a loving ethic; and, finally, I will propose a feminist pedagogical activity to strengthen students' ability to define, evaluate, and demonstrate bell hooks' feminist pedagogy by encouraging their own sense experience that is grounded in a love ethic, and, by extension, Black feminisms.

A sense experience relies on our senses—including touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing—to clarify social conditions through our bodies. Horsley's (2022) “Sniff, Bite, Taste, Swallow,” teaches the linkages between sensation, Blackness, and history. She writes:

The sensorial is historically tethered to the experiences, memories, and survival of captive Africans manifest in breathing, eating, touching, and smelling, marking (in)humane conditions, captured in their struggle to breathe while positioned in tiny unlivable spaces, side-by-side, packed like spoons with no room to turn, piled on top of one another aboard overcrowded slave ships.

The linkages between Blackness, sensation, and history are magnified by hooks' work, particularly her estimation of agency, the gaze of the Other, and “looking” relations where Black people learn to look a certain way to resist white representations of blackness, such as *Amos 'n' Andy* producing an oppositional Black gaze for political advancement. This production is motivated by hooks' loving ethic.

Learning Objectives

A sense experience is an anti-racist Black feminist teaching tool that encourages students to explore Black feminisms definitions, developments, and deployments for social equity. Students' exploration of stereotyping, erasure, misogynoir, and sexism in the public realm is done primarily by looking at public-facing media. Throughout the semester, students will engage Sojourner Truth's loving ethic, the National Association of Colored Women's writings and convening, and Horsley's (2022) sense praxis in the context of Black women's positionalities and sensibilities in a music video. Following their engagement, students are encouraged to choose a social justice issue and design an artistic or academic cultural production that reflects a loving ethic utilizing the senses—including touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing. Thereby, their sense experiences articulate social justice issues including women's rights, workers' rights, and anti-racist theorizing, among many others, while epistemic Black feminisms are manifested. Most importantly, a sense experience initiates social transformation through activating bodily sensibly that garners the attention to the broader community. Ultimately, students will 1. Define social transformation; 2. Create a product such as a sculpture, music video, image/s that reflects feminist values including access to discourse, ethics of care, critical thinking, and social transformation; and 3. Explain their product using critical concepts introduced throughout the course.

Explanation

The undergraduate exercise will 1. Succor students' ability to discuss feminist values including access to discourse, ethics of care, and critical thinking 2. Evaluate how we enact bell hooks' feminist pedagogy to teach students about social transformation. For their sense experience, students will choose a current or past event that is related to Black feminisms to present to the class. Each student will have 10 to 12 minutes to introduce, explain, and discuss their sense experience. An image, set of images, a sculpture using different materials, or a music video are acceptable productions for students to consider. Students are encouraged to use their creativity to define social transformation, explore a social justice issue, and explain critical concepts that are relevant to their social justice issue. For example, if a student chooses to discuss the state of Black women's reproductive rights in the state of Alabama, the student could display a set of images from a women's rights protest. Alternatively, a student who prefers to discuss women's rights could make a sculpture using protest materials (i.e., stamps, poster boards, and Planned Parenthood business cards) to discuss women's rights during presentation day in the course. Following students' showcase of their sense experience, the students in the course will be able to name a few social justice issues that could relate to the sense experience that is being discussed. Once all the students in the audience have offered their initial thoughts on the product/sense experience, the presenting student will name their product and discuss how their sense experience relates to their chosen topic including their sense experience-making process. The professor is encouraged to facilitate a discussion based on critical concepts in the course (i.e., How did you consider racialized gender in your sense experience?).

Debriefing

Love is gained when we embrace a loving ethic to bell hooks' framed feminist pedagogies as sets of constellations including socio-political ideas, lived experiences, and grounded practices to advance feminism—as a movement, an academic field, an epistemology—beyond the American project. hooks' frame teaches us how to love. That is, to explore what is sensed and continues to be in service of Black women. hooks continues to offer her students—scholars/activists, either in the Twitterverse or grassroots organizations outside of the cybersphere—innovative understandings of power, privilege, and penalty. These hegemonic systems continue to condition Black women's quotidian lives, including in the United States (U.S.), the Global South, and across the African continent. I invite you to love as bell hooks has loved us. We need to identify, explore, and hone sense experiences to explore the poetics of Blackness, here and there. Horsley's (2022) “Sniff, Bite, Taste, Swallow” framed a sense experience in her work on Black women's sexualities in a way that asserts Black women's sexual agency by advancing hooks' loving ethic. Horsley writes that sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell are “modes of erotic power and resistance under anti-racism establish alternative futures of the stench of Black bodily fluids and loss of appetite experienced under enslavement and captivity.” Therefore, to sense the relationship between Blackness and its histories is to deploy a loving ethic to achieve resistance from forms of racial domination. Furthermore, Horsley advances hooks' scholarship beyond the transatlantic slave trade to consider how Black women have garnered and showcased their sexual agency, particularly in hip-hop music videos. Queue, “Throat Baby Remix” by BRS Kash, DaBaby, and City Girls. Horsley discusses the meaning-making end to which smell, like taste, is a philosophy using Black studies scholar LaMonda H. Stallings; Stallings (2015) writes, “signifying funk as an adaptation *eros* to decolonizing efforts or funk with the erotic...as a philosophy about being or un/becoming human...as a philosophy about what it means to be *otherly* human, in/human, or nonhuman (p. 1-2).” Therefore, Stallings and Horsley propose sensation to interpret, analyze, and share knowledge about Black historical, present, and future legacies.

A sense experience rooted in a loving ethic is inspired by Black feminisms' past, present, and future, and the conditions under which its theorizations aptly exist. Black feminisms pour hope, possibility, and freedom into a movement based in Black women's futurity. Loving is advocating against people who insist the State should control women's bodies. Loving is protecting Black women against social violence that erupts when legislations inch closer to Black women's autonomy and denouncing racist and sexist tropes that are created and circulated to undermine a Black feminist movement. Loving Blackness is an act inspired by and directly linked to the intellectual estuary that is Black feminisms. Loving Blackness is an intellectual enterprise and praxis that is largely interventionist regarding how we evaluate Black feminisms against memory-work and apply it as a method to disturb and illuminate socio-political practices that misrepresent and oppress Black women (hooks, 1992). Most recently, many white women demonstrated sense experience to advocate for women's rights to abortion. Many women wore handmaids red robes from the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* to signify lifeblood as they portrayed as Gilead's¹ reproductive beings. It is interesting how color is a vital sensible

¹ A totalitarian dystopia.

experience because red, when chosen against a vibrant teal (signifying wifehood) or muted greens (signifying Martha who is solely a domestic caretaker in Gilead), is a conscious effort by women to create a sense experience of what the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the U.S. Supreme Court would look like today: a modern-day Gilead. However, hooks' *Black Looks* teaches us how to sense (look) at mainstream images to understand the ways in which Black women are either erased or overlooked in modern social movements and images, including *The Handmaids Tale*.

Assessment

The undergraduate students' sense experience should demonstrate a set of sensibilities grounded in three Black feminist values to advance the way we articulate and do justice, including empowerment, community, and (anti)marginalization. A sense experience makes students' and an audience's sensibilities manifest through bodily conjuring relative to the poetics of Blackness; and by extension, it is a feminist practice in that it recognizes the extent to which Blackness is sensed, recorded, and explained by Black people to other Black people, and the world. A sense experience provides undergraduates with the intellectual range to understand social injustice and networks of power that are always in play as social, political, and cultural conditions are created by structural racisms and misogynoir.

Empowerment is a crucial part of creating a creative learning community. In the sense experience, empowerment is defined not as domination, but as "energy, capacity and potential" (Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 10) to strengthen someone's capacity to garner their own agency and power. Secondly, students share a sense of responsibility for mutual learning, not just their own. Students must share a sense experience that is to help them deal with different standpoints. The point here is that the interactive sense experience is a form of teaching to uncover societal dangers and social ills. Therefore, students' sense experience should uncover some social ills and explain how systems *might* be held accountable for those social ills. In this way, a community is formed as it is based in mutual respect and understanding of one's social location or standpoint. Finally, students' sense experience should define and explain social marginalization as a site of resistance. hooks (1989) taught us that marginalization is a necessary analytic for oppressed people. Additionally, hooks (1989) made it clear:

if we only view the margin as a sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom of expression.... enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.

Together, these three values will strengthen students' sense experience in a way that is socially transformative and personally enriches the lives of marginalized people and allies who aim to intervene in the perpetuation of injustice by sensing and deploying a loving ethic at the margins.

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