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Black Feminist Pedagogy In White Southern Spaces

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Ana Croegart and Shauna Morgan for feedback on early drafts and to the special issue reviewers for insight on the final version.

“The classroom remains the most radical space of opportunity in the academy” (hooks, 1994, p. 6).

This essay describes my efforts to teach to transgress through a Black feminist pedagogy. I draw on over 10 years of experience teaching undergraduate courses in political science at a small liberal arts college in the mid-South. I center reflections on attempts to formulate and employ a Black feminist pedagogy in a setting in which teaching and learning expectations are anchored in traditional notions of pedagogy and professorial authority. My goals are threefold: first, to discuss the challenge of taking a Black feminist pedagogical approach in political science; second, to describe the challenge of being the only Black woman faculty at a predominately white institution in the mid-South at a moment of increased political polarization; and finally, to acknowledge the necessary, and often unrecognized, labor that is at the heart of teaching to transgress.

Context and setting

I taught at a small liberal arts college in the mid-South for the first 12 years of my academic career. Students at this college were predominantly white and from southern states. Around 30% were first generation students; some were legacy, and many came from heteronormative backgrounds and had spent much of their school and personal life in the absence of Black or Indigenous or people of color (BIPOC). During my time at the college, the population of BIPOC students rose as high as around 18%, but the number of BIPOC faculty consistently hovered around 3%. It was a staunchly red state, and most students were encountering worldviews alternative to their conservative upbringing for the first time.

Fresh out of graduate school with a PhD in political science, a master’s degree in Africana Studies, and training in gender and women’s studies, I was only at the beginning of developing my pedagogy. I approached the position with some trepidation, if for no other reason than there were no other Black faculty on campus and only two other BIPOC faculty. I had a clear understanding that for many of the students, I was the first and only POC they would ever see on the other side of the lectern. The fact that I was a cisgender, afro wearing, straight Black woman standing in the front of the room challenging, even if subtly, students to examine what they believe and why they believe it, did not go unnoticed. I felt a responsibility to introduce students to challenging ideas and simultaneously affirm those marginalized students who were struggling and feeling unseen.

The discipline- political science and pedagogy

While it has undergone serious challenges and some evolution over the past 20 years, political science pedagogy is still deeply steeped in an authoritarian patriarchal manner of teaching (Levintova et al., 2018). Review of the discipline’s journals reflects the paucity of research in political science about Black women, despite recent changes to the field (Alexander-Floyd, 2014).

In such cases, hooks (1994) reminds us what is considered to be a normative authoritative body more readily prevails:

The erasure of the body [e.g., ignoring where the professor stands, how physically close they are to students. etc.] encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information (p. 139).

As Black woman faculty, my presence at the front of the room invited intense scrutiny and questioning of my credentials and entitlement to that position. Often, my body was read as Other, subversive, and out of place in the classroom. Students' lack of familiarity with the body at the lectern "can overdetermine what happens in the classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 86). Yet, even as my body was read as Other, I felt that students still expected that I adhere to traditional pedagogy: passive transmission of hegemonic views of politics and political science.

Teaching political science in white spaces.

It was against this backdrop that I stepped into the classroom to teach political science. One of the pillars of my emerging Black feminist pedagogy was to help students put concepts to their personal experiences to facilitate conceptual understanding and help them to articulate this knowledge, producing an engaged learning context. hooks (1994) upholds the value of experience as part of a Black feminist pedagogy, noting that personal experience, along with classroom strategies that affirm students' presence and right to speak "in multiple ways and on diverse topics" are valuable pedagogical tools (p. 84).

If, "students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed" (hooks, 1994, p. 83-84), white heterosexual male students enter the room as the embodied experience and voice of authority. This was especially the case in the political climate of the early 21st century where the election of a Black president (and the resulting backlash) revealed incivility around politics, in and out of the classroom.

The fact that classroom lectures went beyond the classic recitation of political science theories and into a discussion of power, its distribution, and inequalities in societies meant that I was at times met with student skepticism at best, and outward hostility at worst. Some white students described my classroom as "too political," while BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students often found the opportunity to talk about issues of social and political inequity in an academic setting to be important to their academic development. Exercises that invited students to reflect on their own socialization in school, at home and in other quotidian spaces revealed positions of privilege while exposing vulnerabilities to oppression. I positioned myself as a person who was marginalized in the U.S. while simultaneously holding a position of power in the classroom, by sharing my experiences around elections, state power, and education among others. Meeting students where they were and facilitating discussions with empathy and patience were at the center of my classroom instruction. The tension between wanting to challenge students to engage with content and each other, while simultaneously wanting to shield myself from harm, permeated my pedagogy.

The feminist classroom demands a certain amount of humility and vulnerability on the part of the instructor in order for it to be done well, and this vulnerability looks different for faculty in marginalized groups. Black women professors are routinely poorly evaluated, subject to harassment in the classroom, and suffer from occupational related anxiety and depression even

when they DON'T seek to upend traditional notions of classroom authority (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). The continued vulnerability and radical honesty about my own positions of privilege and experiences of oppression did the work of both rendering me visible and challenging my classroom authority.

Conclusion

My journey to teaching to transgress within the context of teaching political science at a white institution in the mid-South was riddled with contradictions. Trying to develop a Black feminist pedagogy that would help students connect experiences to the material, expose inconsistencies, and question received knowledge meant my early teaching days were full of discomfort, excitement, and unacknowledged labor. The process necessitated humility and empathy in order to move students to actively question and challenge dominant power relations thus facilitating the development of my Black feminist pedagogy. hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* provided both a roadmap and the courage to bring that humility and empathy to the classroom.

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