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## Academic Spaces of Possibility? A Proleptic Dialogue with BlackFeminism at the Center

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## Academic Spaces of Possibility? A Proleptic Dialogue with BlackFeminism at the Center

### Cover Page Footnote

The authors gratefully acknowledge Shirley A. Rowe, Esq. for her expertise in proofing and for fruitful conversations in the preparation of the manuscript.

## Academic Spaces of Possibility? A Proleptic Dialogue with BlackFeminism<sup>1</sup> at the Center

*Unlikely co-conspirators, speaking together:* Fall 2021. Nondescript classroom, nondescript campus. The first day of a very descript “Black Feminist Thought and Expression” (BFTE) course (*fig. 1*). In class, we gather stories about our names, reaching for roots... We share the story of BFTE, (its/our) becoming on this white-serving campus, occupying indigenous lands. We are three educators/learners, unlikely to come together as BFTE’s co-teachers – a Black chemistry graduate student, a white mathematics part-time faculty, and a white non-U.S. communication studies assistant professor.



*Fig. 1. BFTE Syllabus, pages 1 and 3*

We learn, with hooks and Scapp (1994), that unlikely friendships can be made generative, that embodiment and emotion are knowledge, that who/what we carry with ourselves in educational spaces is consequential and always changing “in a dialogue with a world beyond itself” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). We enter the classroom, bringing our differences, committed to hooks’ pedagogical vision.

*bh: ... education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor* (hooks, 1994, p. 14).

We start BFTE by reading “Engaged Pedagogy” (hooks, 1994), together, aloud. hooks’ presence fills the classroom, echoes through the semester, provokes

<sup>1</sup> After Boylorn (2016), we use the OneWord spelling to highlight the both/and of race/gender.

an in-tense in-inquiry: How do we center BlackFeminism *and* students, while decentering whiteness in this mostly white-bodied, whiteness-trained classroom? Our learning is *dialogically* in-tense: demanding our attention to the arrays of voices in us, the texts we select, the practices we engage, the knowers we invite *and* become. It is a *proleptic* dialogic tension: “simultaneously existing in the present, past, and future (...) individual and collective acts of remembering and embodying” (Cortes, 2020, pp. 133-134). We hear proleptic dialogues when hooks speaks with collaborators and with her own whole embodied selves – as a BlackWoman, student, teacher, scholar – within and across texts (*fig. 2*). She teaches an ethic of “returning to the body” – dialogically, in-relation, in-tension, engaging “ourselves as subjects in history” (hooks, 1994, p. 139).<sup>2</sup>

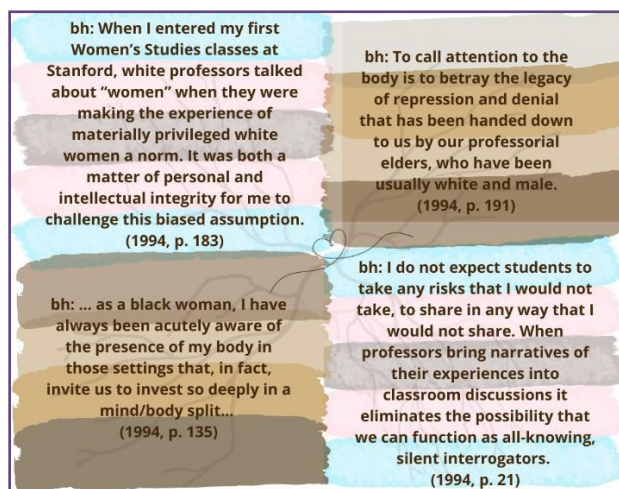


Fig. 2. Quotation Quilt: hooks' Proleptic Dialogue

Moving toward this ethic, in BFTE, we seek proleptic dialogic knowing not only or even primarily interpersonally, but through embodied intentional silences, creative and reflexive expressions, autoethnographies, quotes quilting, mapping (*fig. 3* and *4*)<sup>3</sup>... We are growing BFTE into connected homeplaces for BlackFeminist pedagogy (hooks, 1990/1994).

*LB*: For me, BFTE begins as an intentional response to painful alienation – here, there are few physical spaces centering care and community-building around

<sup>2</sup> Although we are aware of APA's citation style which asks for quotations to be prefaced with verbs in the past tense, we adhere to the present, honoring a proleptic dialogic approach, in which “the gone” and “the said” are currently present with us, rather than relegate to a stagnant past.

<sup>3</sup> BFTE learners created quotation quilts (*fig. 2* and *4*) and learning maps (*fig. 3*) to trace dis/connections among texts and/or experiences. Both activities begin with identifying a theme. Then, individually and/or together, we craft visual placements of/for conversing ideas. Quotation quilts imagine proleptic dialogues – we begin with quotes from a central text and then “stitch” quotes from other texts that amplify what is said, challenge it, or move us to consider it differently.

Black herstory. I have deep relationships with BlackFeminists like Lorde, Collins, Sanchez, Gumbs, and want to center the joy and healing of their words and beings. In my vision, I crave/carve a BlackWoman place (*fig. 3*).

But then... I was the only BlackWoman in the classroom, longing to *belong* (hooks, 2009). My knowing/feeling body was precariously out-of-place, again. I had imagined the power of my relationship to BlackFeminism radiating, growing as a living/life force rooting in learners' embodied experiences. But in that overwhelmingly white classroom, in the belly of a pandemic with dangerous physicality, we were hyper-conscious of race, conscious of masked, closed bodies. The distance depleted me.

*bh: For those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no 'homeplace' where we can recover ourselves. (1990/1994, p. 450)*

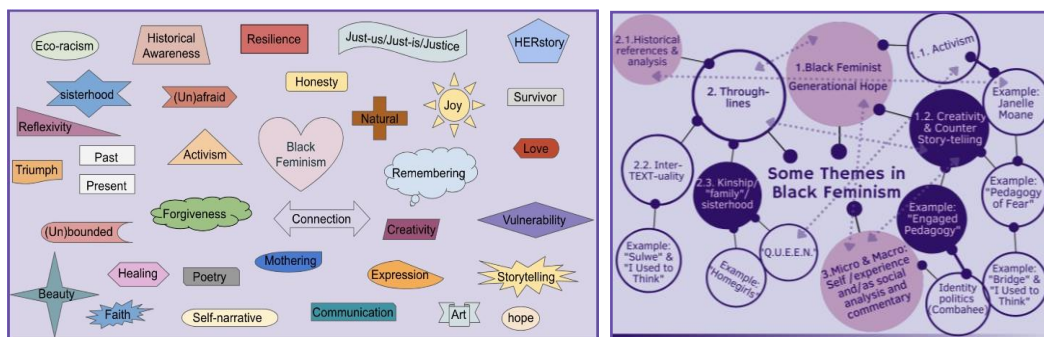


Fig. 3. BFTE Learning Maps

*LH:* Lauren, when you said the physical classroom was not a (home)place for your blackgirl body (Boylorn, 2016), we knew it with our postures: rigid, silent in the small desks, at 9.30 am, with winter chomping daylight. We had to become “designers” – “actors who intentionally organize space and make deliberate decisions about the teaching/learning experiences [of] others” (Cortes, 2020, p. 141). This wasn’t about finding different bridges, it was, to borrow embodiment from the seminal *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981/2021), that we – each a knower/learner – needed to stretch and strengthen our backs over different connecting streams, to become connectors differently.

*KR:* Early in the course, we introduced Gottman’s feelings wheel and the window of tolerance to help us name affective experiences of texts and each other. Initially, I felt wedged in “scared,” but by the time Lauren hosted the kitchen-table-talk<sup>4</sup>, I found myself also in “joy.” I had been moving towards home/work (Boylorn, 2016) as the “classroom” came to mean learning places that

<sup>4</sup> “Black Feminism and me/ME,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-sju1kuy0k>

included the home of my own body of whiteness. Home/work was private in- and out-of-class autoethnographic inquiry that facilitated embodied learning while precluding centering whiteness in our shared classroom space. Home/work was writing the dis/connecting potential of my white body as a site of/for knowledge. Perhaps students moved to/with home/work similarly as they shared connections to BlackFeminism where it mattered to them – country music, running, drag...

*LB:* However, while we successfully centered BlackFeminist knowledge in the physical classroom, this space was still not a homeplace for my blackgirl *body*. I turned my back sideways and began bridge-building dialogic podcasts with other BlackFeminists discussing BFTE texts. We stretched and twisted the classroom into connected spaces, crafting something of a “homeplace” for me.

*bh:* *When black women renew our political commitment to homeplace, we can address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition* (1990/1994, p. 454).

*LB:* Without exposing myself in the physical classroom, the podcasts were blackgirl gathering spaces. Prioritizing intellectual rigor and care, they grew into teaching tools, meaningfully relating personal experiences to BlackFeminist texts (hooks, 1994). At semester’s end, I facilitated a public intergenerational kitchen-table-talk among BlackFeminists. Our distinct “ways of knowing” had common threads that wove ... a *sistah*-hood of poetic blackgirl magic (*fig. 4*).

*Together:* We started, like most college classes, with/in a nondescript institutionally-assigned room... We co-created multiple connected places where body-rooted dialogues are continuing as in-tense possibilities.

*bh:* *We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, (...) heal our wounds and become whole.* (1990/1994, p. 454)

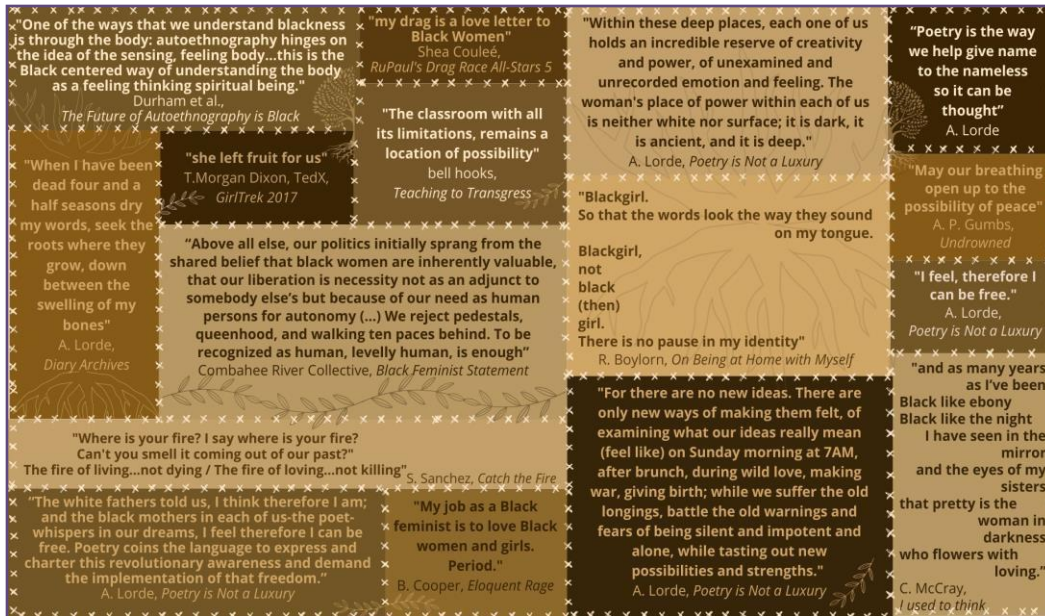


Fig. 4. Quotation Quilt: BFTE Homeplace

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