

Critiquing the Rhetoric of “Safety” in Feminist Pedagogy: Women of Color Offering an Account of Ourselves

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“It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors.”

—Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 42

With its emphasis on empowering students’ voices and valuing experiential knowledge, and on collaborating and creating community, feminist pedagogy has long been understood as integral to the field of women’s studies. Feminist theories and practices inform how we teach within a feminist classroom. Very little research has been done, however, to illuminate the challenges of embodying feminist pedagogical practices that address the locationality and subjective positions of women faculty of color. According to Christine Stanley, “[t]here is very little empirical research on the teaching experiences of faculty of color in predominantly white colleges and universities . . . [and] . . . most salient themes identified . . . relate to student attitudes and behaviors inside and outside the classroom” (19). In this paper, we critique the rhetoric of safety in feminist pedagogy. We use our own lived experiences and perceptions of safety, or lack of it, to disrupt and interrogate ways in which the hegemonic power of the dominant discourse in academic culture in general, and feminist pedagogy in particular, is embedded in constructing,

naming, and defining feminist teaching and classroom environments.

In framing the critique of the rhetoric of safety in feminist pedagogy, we not only interrogate the dilemmas and challenges in the struggle to embody feminist pedagogical practices, but also problematize and share the strategies that we employ in teaching. We argue that like many other women of color and critical feminists, as stipulated by Kathleen Weiler in *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class, and Power* and Lucila Vargas in *Women Faculty of Color in the White Classroom: Narratives on the Pedagogical Implications of Teacher Diversity*, we also struggle with feminist issues in our lives and in our teaching. However, studies show that neither mainstream feminists nor academia adequately acknowledge the existence of these kinds of challenges.¹ For example, women faculty of color constantly grapple with the rhetoric of “safety” in the classroom, a rhetoric which does not reflect their experiences. They are also confronted with a hostile and skeptical academic climate that forces them to constantly justify and defend themselves.

As women professors of color teaching a class about women of color in a predominantly white institution of higher learning in the Midwest, we discuss our narrative experiences.² According to Petra Munro, the process of narrativizing personal experiences does not merely illuminate women's lives, it also becomes an epistemological process of meaning-making. Daniel E. Polkinghorne argues that narrativizing is also a "narrative cognition" through which we know, construct, and understand the reality of the world around us (9). Therefore, we view narratives as storied ways of knowing through which we communicate trustworthy, valid, and useful knowledge about the reality of our lived experiences. And because the narrativizing process involves analysis, self-reflexivity, and making judgment, it becomes an important means through which to reveal and illuminate complexities of our actions, complexities which are often ignored as women of color.

The questions we raise about teaching and learning are embodied in the wider discourse, as articulated by bell hooks, about faculty of color teaching in predominantly white institutions of higher learning and what it means to teach in places of pedagogical as well as institutional marginality. In the attempt to locate our individual struggles and actions and to critique the rhetoric of safety, we hope to open up dialogues that speak to the connection of such struggles and actions within the larger political, educational, and social structures of power in mainstream academia and in feminist pedagogical circles.

Making this connection is important for two reasons. First, the experiences of women of color have been relegated to the academic cultural oblivion and "have remained private for far too long" (Stan-

ley 22). In defining these experiences and struggles as personal issues, women are expected to deal with them privately. Divorcing struggles of women of color from the larger academic culture has worked to exonerate institutions of higher learning from the responsibility of formulating such issues as important education policy matters. As a result, the struggles and contributions of women faculty of color in academia have either been marginalized or rendered invisible.

Secondly, the experiences of women of color have been marginalized within mainstream feminist pedagogy as well. In her article, "U.S. Academics and Third-World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?," Daphne Patai states that "feminists imagine that merely engaging in the discourse of feminism protects them from the possibility of exploiting other women, while their routine . . . [teaching] practices are, and continue to be, embedded in a situation of . . . inequality" (24). Such teaching practices include, for example, feminist emphasis on creating a safe classroom, as discussed by Theresa McCormick and Kathleen Weiler, among others.

Many of us who follow feminist pedagogical principles state in our teaching philosophies and syllabi that we place significance on creating "safe" classrooms. We claim to build a classroom environment that allows all students to feel safe to discuss their experiences and opinions. However, as we collaborated on this paper, we started wondering if it was possible to really create a "safe" classroom. If it is possible, who creates it? Do faculty have the power and authority to create a "safe" environment? Or is it something created through building trust between the faculty and students after going through moments of vulnerability

and processes of self-disclosure? Problem- atizing such terms as “safe” and “trust” forces us to interrogate the meanings and applications of these terms in our teaching in order to reveal how such terms can be used to perpetuate valued norms of the dominant metanarratives and the assumption that such terms are unproblematic.

The notion that feminists should strive to establish a “safe” class environment does not necessarily reflect the reality of women of color in the classroom. According to hooks, “We have to learn how to appreciate difficulty, too, as a stage in intellectual development. Or accept that that cozy, good feeling may at times block the possibility of giving students space to feel that there is integrity to be found in grappling with difficult material . . . [such as] confessional narratives, books, or discussions” (*Teaching* 154). Additionally, other feminists of color have tried to articulate the “threatening” situations and places in many ways. For example, Tsitsi Dangarembga articulates the concept of nervous conditions; Patricia Hill Collins talks of the position of “insider/outsider” or “outsider within” as a threatening position; Ruth Behar talks about the concept of being a “vulnerable observer.”

Positioning Ourselves as Women of Color in Feminist Pedagogical Discourse

In positioning ourselves as women faculty of color in the discourse of pedagogical practices within institutions of higher learning, we acknowledge the importance of locating our identities within feminist pedagogical discourses. We articulate our positions by drawing on the works of various critical feminist theorists who have written on these issues of identity.

On the one hand, we draw on standpoint theorists like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Uma Narayan, and Emma Perez, who have argued that listening to and interpreting women’s gendered lives is central to feminists’ ways of knowing and knowledge construction. According to these theorists, then, identity and locationality are important organizing principles in the understanding of the gendered lives of women. On the other hand, postmodern feminists have sought to disrupt the notion of an essentialized self by arguing that it is an appropriation of masculinist constructions directed at disempowering women. In theorizing Leslie Bloom’s notion of “non-unitary subjectivity,” postmodern feminists have argued that women’s lives, especially those who live in the margins, cannot be comprehensively understood from the position of an essentialized unitary self. They argue that the “self” is not unitary and static but rather multiple and in constant flux within the intersection of race, class, gender, etc. Therefore, to view women’s identities from a unitary position is to obscure the dynamism and the complexity of their lives in the margins.

The tension between the risk of deconstructing the unitary subjectivity, which has functioned to highlight gender as a social construct, and the corresponding fear of losing the category “woman” has been central to the political project of feminism and has been well documented in feminist identity discourses. Petra Munro, for example, asks: “If there is no such category as ‘woman,’ since gendered ‘identity’ is a construction of masculinist binary thought [. . .], what becomes of the subject, traditionally thought necessary for resistance?” (1). In other words, if the category “woman” does not hold, would there be a need for resistance and agency?

In response to this tension, Perez, drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Luce Irigaray, articulates her position as a “strategic essentialist.” She defines a strategic essentialist as “one who exercises political representation, or identity politics within hegemonic structures” (87). She contends that this strategy not only asserts counter sites within dominant society but also gives “voices to each new marginalized social or political group bonded temporarily at specific historical moments” (88).

We recognize the need to take a strategic essentialist stand in the engagement of the plight of women of color as a group within feminist scholarship and in academia because this allows us a kind of group solidarity and togetherness that is necessary for resistance and voice. Spivak, cited in Perez, contends that “It is not possible not to be an essentialist; one can self-consciously use this irreducible moment of essentialism as part of one’s strategy” (87). We concur with Munro’s sentiments that to revive the notion of an essentialized self when the subjectivity has become non-unitary is to enter deeply contested feminist political terrain. However, just like Munro, we “seek simultaneously to create and disrupt the notions of the subject” (1) and thereby create fluid spaces in which to articulate and make sense of our positionalities in different contextual landscapes. As feminists of color, the notion of non-unitary subjectivity has allowed us in many instances to articulate our identities in various sites and discourses in personal, professional, or academic arenas. But we also see strategic essentialism as an important point of departure as we interrogate our position as professors of color teaching in a predominantly white institution of higher learning.

We subscribe to Perez’s strategic essentialism for the following reasons. First, we see ourselves currently as a marginalized group bonded temporarily at a very specific historical moment in our teaching careers. Secondly, in our positions as women faculty of color, strategic essentialism allows us to contest the power dynamics and the irreducible differences inherent in our relationships with our students and the institution. We concur with Perez’s argument that the resolution of those differences is neither desirable nor necessary, but rather the focus is on how we navigate through them in addressing issues of diversity in our classrooms and institutions. We therefore essentialize ourselves strategically against dominant pedagogical ideologies and practices that work to disempower, ignore, and silence the views and experiences of women of color in academia. In other words, by essentializing ourselves strategically as women faculty of color within the counter sites of hegemonic academia, we are not only working to prevent cultural, political, and academic suicide, but also to resist being homogenized and censored. Thirdly, by essentializing ourselves strategically as women faculty of color, we establish, from our conflicted identities and sites, creative counter sites within a Eurocentric institutional climate where new theories of teaching and learning and new pedagogical discourses and practices emerge, unfold, and flourish. And finally, by taking these essentializing strategies as survival strategies, we posit that the emerging pedagogical discourses and practices be not only incorporated in mainstream feminist pedagogical discourses but also allowed to influence and impact feminist ways of teaching and learning.

In the following section, we explore the

concept of self-disclosure and vulnerability as it relates to the rhetoric of safety in the classroom.

Self-Disclosure and Vulnerability in the Classroom

Locating ourselves and our identity as women of color in a predominantly white institution is very important. We often find ourselves having to define and justify ourselves to our students in the classroom. Stanley alludes to the fact that because the color of teaching in U.S. academia is generally white, people of color represent difference, and because difference is perceived as deviant and threatening, it becomes politicized. Therefore, faculty of color, particularly women of color, often feel the need to defend and justify ourselves and are often under pressure to disclose our personal lives. Because the classes we teach that deal with race, class, and gender are met with student resistance as they feel they are “forced to take these classes” to fulfill graduation requirements, and because the issues we discuss challenge their white privilege, their belief in meritocracy, and their comfort zones, the pressure to disclose our personal lives in the classroom becomes inevitable. In addition, teaching social justice issues is not easy, especially in the context of the recent assault on academic freedom in universities, which attacks such courses for perpetuating the liberal and leftist agenda (Giroux 15–19). Moreover, students often see the class as perpetuating the professor’s personal agenda rather than dealing with racial and gender issues as legitimate objects of study.

It is within this racial and political context that, as women faculty of color, we find ourselves having to justify our pres-

ence in the classroom. The way we define ourselves becomes a very political issue in class and literally makes or breaks our teaching environment and endeavors. As a result, we have come to realize that self-disclosure and self-justification have worked in many instances to preempt disrespectful comments and behaviors from students.

Self-disclosure and vulnerability are often mutually inclusive. Self-disclosure often opens somebody up for scrutiny and renders one vulnerable. Vulnerability is the feeling of being opened up for scrutiny not only by students but also by whomever is around us, and it comes with its own fears and anxieties. It means that one’s life is continuously open for scrutiny from students, the community, and the administration. Being open for scrutiny reinforces the notion that one is different and therefore conspicuous.

Mwangi’s Story

As an African professor, I always introduce my women’s studies courses by first giving my own introduction and background. I find myself telling my students detailed information beginning with my full name(s), which country in Africa I come from, my experience with winter in Iowa and Minnesota, the trauma of cultural shock when I realized I was one of the few blacks in a predominantly white university, the reality of being “black,” “of color,” “minority,” “different,” “other.” As I do this, I find myself always reliving those painful, frightening, disorienting, and devastating moments of my life hoping that students comprehend the depth of those emotions and the simplistic way in which the dominant group assumes the normalcy of belonging. Often I use this

moment of my emotional self-disclosure to encourage and challenge the students to think of the things they take for granted and begin to question and interrogate their own positions, attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs towards those things that are often “normal” everyday occurrences in their lives, such as the sense of belonging.

Self-disclosure is the element of explaining who I am, where I come from and where I am going, as well as my professional background at the beginning of the course. I often feel obligated to do this to establish my presence in the classroom. It is like letting the students know—“hello, I am here! And I have something to offer!!!” Self-disclosure becomes a way of not only authenticating my presence in the classroom but also talking back to myself, to use hooks’s phrase. Disclosing myself acknowledges up front that I am in a position of vulnerability and thereby invokes a reminder to myself that I am braced to do what I need to do.

Using the metaphor of a “journey,” a term I have used over time not only to come to terms with my own life as a woman of color but more specifically to map out the conflicted complexities of my life trajectories within the historical and cultural materiality as a Third World woman, I encourage my students, too, to begin to see the semester ahead as a journey. Through the readings, class discussions, and other class activities, I invoke a sense of my students and I preparing to embark on a provocative, unsettling, and sometimes contentious “journey” that starts at the beginning of the semester and ends on the last day of class. Relaying the teaching and learning process in terms of a “journey” is a powerful pedagogical strategy that I use to

imply a challenging task ahead of us. First, because the courses I teach deal with issues of race, class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity, and because feminist pedagogy and scholarship calls for liberation, empowerment, change, and agency, such courses can never fail to be politically and socially loaded. Additionally, because as a woman of color, students are inclined to read me as a teacher of difference who is different, teaching becomes a highly political endeavor requiring that both the students and myself “brace for the rough ride.” Secondly, the metaphor of a journey also implies joys, uncertainties, concerns, confusions, anger, victories, and failures, which reflect attributes that are also often used to describe many women’s studies classroom environments. In order to brace the students for the journey, I encourage them not only to be reflexive of their thought trails but also to document their reflexivity through writing journals. Such journals become not only a source of powerful group discussions but also significant markers of students’ growth towards the goal of critical consciousness and change over time.

Kishimoto’s Story

How much information we disclose as women of color depends on our racial background. I, as an Asian American professor, am more selective of the information I disclose than my other colleagues because the model minority myth, although a devastating stereotype of Asian Americans, works to my advantage in this context. The students do not necessarily question my qualifications as much as they would those of other faculty of color. To compensate for my youthful appearance, however, I emphasize my

PhD degree only to convey to the students that I am older than I appear. On the other hand, I have to battle the stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. The fact that I have an “American accent” works to my advantage, although for some, my face is enough for them to hear or imagine a foreign accent in my non-Midwestern voice. However, I still feel compelled to emphasize my birth and life in the U.S. and not disclose the years I spent in Asia for fear of reducing my “authenticity” as a U.S. American.³ I feel the need to focus more on my life in the U.S. so the students will not question my qualifications for teaching a class about people of color in the U.S.

The information I usually disclose includes my experiences of being a person of color in a small Midwestern town where people were unfamiliar with Asian Americans. I comically recount my misadventures with racism and ignorance. Although there is always the danger of trivializing the racism, I use humor as an intentional strategy since humor and personal stories help students feel more connected to the issues. For example, I always get asked “Where are you from?” When I mention a city in the U.S., they demand to know “No, where are you *really* from?” as if I don’t know where I was born. Another comment I frequently get is, “Oh, you speak good English.” I use these personal examples to help students understand that these comments come from the popular misconception that a U.S. American looks white, so an Asian American who is not white *must* be a foreigner. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain stereotypes and oppression to students who are indifferent and resistant to discussions of contemporary racism. These comments are very annoying, frustrating, and degrading. I always wondered

what right these people have to walk up to a complete stranger and start badgering them with interrogating questions. In regards to the second comment about my English-speaking ability, I have come up with a very clever retort: “Thank you, you also speak English very well.” Unfortunately, ever since I have come up with that response, people have not commented on my language skills . . . it seems that people can now suddenly sense that I am waiting to expose their incorrect grammar and/or ignorance. Through the various personal accounts of people always thinking of me as a foreigner and not being able to tell the difference among diverse Asian ethnicities, I try to help my students understand the stereotypes of “American as white” and “all Asians are alike.” Thus, I use my personal experience as a teaching tool.

In paying attention to our experiences, it is interesting to note that the extent to which we disclose ourselves is varied according to our racial and ethnic background. It seems that I disclose myself much less than Mwangi does. At the same time, I am also very selective and intentional about which parts of my life I disclose. I have always felt uncomfortable revealing my life to the students when I knew absolutely nothing about them. My prior educational experience also did not expose me to the practice of professors divulging personal information. It did not seem to be a reciprocal relationship. In terms of power relations, as the professor, I obviously had the upper hand, but this self-disclosure and self-justification made me feel very vulnerable—that I was under a microscope of forty pair of eyes. This especially became a burden when I found out that for many of the students, I was the first woman professor or teacher of color they have had in their life.

To further articulate this sense of scrutiny, we refer to Michel Foucault's concept of surveillance and panopticism.⁴ The power of surveillance is omnipresent in academia, the university, and the classroom. The power of surveillance often lies in the normalcy and invisibility of domination, which leads the subordinate groups to accept that the oppressive system is actually working to their benefit. Surveillance becomes even more oppressive when the surveilled begin to surveil themselves. A good example of this self-regulatory conformity is the model minority myth, whereby the notion that Asian Americans have succeeded through hard work and without challenging the system not only perpetuates the myth of meritocracy, but also the idea that "if Asian Americans can do it, why can't you?" Working hard and not challenging the system becomes Foucault's panoptic lens through which minorities are surveilled, controlled, and defined. The multiple hegemonic panoptic gazes in the academic environment such as teaching evaluations, the tenure/promotion process, workload/assignments, hiring process, and pressure to be civil/non-controversial become so normalized that the surveilled also becomes part of the surveillance, consciously or unconsciously. In the same way, as women of color, we see ourselves through the academic cultural gaze, which often comprises dominant ideas of teaching and which prescribes sanitized modes of teaching.

Surveillance also gives us a false sense of safety, which can be extended to our discussion of how problematic the "safe" classroom is. This false sense of safety implied by surveillance is only creating a controlled and predictable environment that does not challenge the hegemonic

system, thereby ignoring our subjective positionalities. Given that our subjective positionalities are ignored, we find the Western feminist gaze, which claims a commitment to upholding the feminist idea of a "safe" classroom, problematic.

In the book *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar articulates the concept of vulnerability and throwing down the camera to become a "vulnerable observer" in order to bring about change. Using Behar's idea, it is imperative that feminists abandon the conventional Western feminist gaze and redefine the process of teaching and learning. We cannot continue to sanitize our teaching when women of color do not live in such utopian and sanitized conditions. We also cannot deny or silence the contributions of women of color, particularly when we want to teach students to be critical of the inequalities and hegemonic social structures that are responsible for the world's injustices.

For example, by having a woman professor of color, the white students may feel uncomfortable talking about women of color because they suddenly become aware of their own white identity. In Kishimoto's Women of Color class, the students questioned whether they, as white students, could research about communities of color. As a result, the class had a long discussion about the ethical issues of outsiders (and the dominant group) studying about other communities. Based on assigned class readings on Devon Mihesuah's analysis of the politics of studying other groups, a major question that was raised in the class discussions was the motive of the white person researching about Native communities. Was it for personal gain (to get publication, to become famous, to make money)? Was the research hurting the community

by perpetuating stereotypes? Was it perpetuating the outsider's perspective? These questions made the students feel as if they were "speaking for" the women of color because of the outsider and dominant position they hold in society as white students. This led to deeper discussions of the impact of the researcher's identity, his/her motive for researching, and the effects of his/her research on the Native communities. The students' identities were challenged by recognizing the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. Their awareness that they were not neutral observers made them feel very uncomfortable because their intention for doing research became suspect based on questions such as: Did the research benefit the community by portraying a complex and more accurate picture of the tribe or other communities of color? Whose perspective was being represented in the research? Did the research value the community's perspectives? Was the researcher respectful of the community and did s/he ask for permission and input from the community being researched? Was the researcher aware of the politics and complex issues surrounding the research topic and the effects the study could have on the community after the research became published? The students concluded that as long as the researcher was aware of these issues and the social position they hold in society, an outsider should be able to research about other communities. Through these discussions, the white students navigated through the discomfort and fear of being the dominant group in the research, and consequently reached a higher level of critical consciousness that opened them up to have a productive, rather than a defensive, dialogue with other students of

color about their vulnerability in the process of learning about people of color.

We use Behar's theory of vulnerability to articulate ways to resist the ubiquity of hegemonic power in academia, university, and classroom. We argue that being vulnerable, although seemingly perpetuating the marginalization and oppression of women of color, actually becomes liberating if it enables social change and rethinking pedagogical practices. Consequently, we can speak inversely to the power structure from the margins by becoming aware of our oppression and acknowledging the societal operations that perpetuate oppression and inequalities. By being vulnerable, as women of color, we can reveal the hegemonic systems within the academia, destroy the cameras that surveil us, dismantle the status quo, and build a more egalitarian and much more democratic system.

Theorizing Self-Disclosure, Vulnerability, and "Safety"

Contrary to the rhetoric of safety in feminist pedagogy, our experiences as women faculty of color teaching in a Midwestern university drive us to envision feminist pedagogical practices that embrace and validate discomfort and vulnerability as important components in learning and teaching about the experiences of women of color.

TEACHING VULNERABLY

Tsitsi Dangarembga's analogy of "nervous conditions" befits the description of what it means to teach vulnerably. Teaching and learning become processes of frustration and uncertainty that work to disrupt the conventional feminist pedagogical assumption that a "safe" classroom envi-

ronment is an essential prerogative for effective learning. In our teaching, we began to explore how we can turn this vulnerability into a strength. We started questioning how we can understand vulnerability as a place to theorize marginalized *and* privileged identities and how we can use differences as counter hegemonic tools.

In order to illuminate and problematize Eurocentric notions of feminist teaching practices that fail to recognize the experiences of women faculty of color in academia and in the classroom, we argue that feminist pedagogy must be unsettling. To demand or expect that women faculty of color teach in a “safe” environment is to be oblivious to our reality, which creates contradictory demands that alienate us from ourselves and our lived experiences. For us, navigating through these contradictions is an important aspect of our teaching, but narrativizing those contradictions is also crucial to the discovery of ourselves as professors of color. Additionally, as we became aware of these contradictions, we opened up the discussion about the need to revisit and engage in a continued dialogue about feminist pedagogy. Teaching for us encompasses an inner struggle between choosing to abandon ourselves to the “otherness” or retaining our identity as women of color in the classroom and the institution.

It became clear to us that to teach vulnerably is to constantly be aware of the power dynamics of the classroom. How we confront these dynamics is an indication of what we do and how we teach as women professors of color. Teaching vulnerably is an ethically and politically complex undertaking. For example, by teaching vulnerably, we not only challenge students to come out of their comfort zones and embrace their fears, but also ask them to

trust us with their intellectual possibilities and their emotional and ideological uncertainties, a process that is reinforced by the fact that they are betting their learning experiences on someone who is occupying the position of the “other.” Even with our good intentions, however, white students often do not always come out of their comfort zones, depending on how hard they hold onto their pre-existing values and beliefs. But for the ones who do so, the risk they take in our classrooms is serious and enormous. We also observe, however, that when students let go of their fears and surpass this stage of doubt, they operate at a higher level of consciousness that truly appreciates the essence of diversity/difference inherent in us. Often accompanying this realization is deeper appreciation of the richness of ideas, perspectives, and insights that we as professors of color bring into the class and into the learning and teaching environment.

For example, teaching the Women of Color course to white students presented a challenge for Mwangi when she encountered some resistance from a few students who questioned the authenticity of the assignment that required them to identify and interview a woman of color. This assignment was predicated upon the feminist research methodological approach that calls for recognition and documentation of narratives of women of color’s lived experiences. Students were expected to listen to and analyze the stories to get a deeper understanding of the respondent’s life experiences. The assignment is based on the premise that stories by themselves may not allow for a deeper appreciation of the women’s lives, but according to Dorothy Smith in *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, when we take the stories and analyze the words

and concepts, we are able to deduce the meaning behind the stories. A few students questioned their authenticity as white students to research women of color. Their main argument was whether or not, by interviewing women of color, they were perpetuating the dominant notion of researching marginalized groups.

While this concern could be valid to some extent, failing to research marginalized groups perpetuates the dominant power relations in the research process. What is important when doing research in an unequal power relation is to acknowledge these relations and be aware of the personal and/or institutional biases that might influence the way one does the research. In addition, analysis of someone else's story does not claim complete authenticity of the researcher's views. Rather, the analysis or the interpretive process is a joint venture between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, the fear that students would put words in the respondents' mouths or that they would interpret their respondents wrongly could be resolved through building a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched. To Mwangi, building this reciprocal relationship is essential when studying people who are different from us. The choice to enter into this precarious negotiation is the hardest thing to do, and deciding not to engage in that kind of research is often the safest way to go for many people (including some of Mwangi's students) who are not ready to leave their comfort zones and confront these dilemmas. In other words, one has to be ready to leave one's comfort zones to enter a vulnerable space.

Therefore, we do not advocate that we stop being vulnerable. Indeed as women of color who are aware of our intricate

lives in the intersection of race, class, gender, etc., we cannot avoid teaching vulnerably. What we would worry about most is if we stopped teaching vulnerably, stopped talking about our vulnerability, and stopped looking at teaching as a vulnerable endeavor. Being uncomfortable protects us from the danger of conformity, which will not only render our voices and those of other women of color silent, but will also mask the specific experiences of women of color as important and unique contributions to feminist pedagogy. Therefore, teaching vulnerably and pushing this as an agenda in feminist pedagogical theorizing becomes for us the sign of hope not only for the inclusion of the perspectives of women of color in feminist pedagogical discourse, but also that such perspectives be taken seriously in influencing feminist pedagogical practices. As Gloria Anzaldúa rightly states,

Anglo feminists who are politically supportive of feminists of color are not convinced of the urgency to include the perspectives of women of color in their own academic work. They are well aware of the absence of women of color in their groups and they are actively trying to correct this problem. But I contend that this limited interpretation of inclusion results in a new kind of exclusion of women of color of which we need to be aware. (44-45)

By using vulnerability as a productive teaching pedagogical practice, we question the concept of safety in the classroom.

“SAFETY” IN THE CLASSROOM

We argue that a learning process that is devoid of lived experiences of marginalized groups, fails to confront the assump-

tions of dominant groups, and discourages critical analysis of the course content and materials, creates a false sense of safety. In discussing self-disclosure and vulnerability as important elements in the classroom, we can view vulnerability and self-disclosure as strengths and not weaknesses. Therefore, these practices must be validated in feminist pedagogy.

In the article, “Women of Color in the Academy: Where’s Our Authority in the Classroom?” Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Ming-Yeh Lee contend that “the combination of feminist pedagogy and women of color can make for a dangerous liaison” (111). Although we agree with their assertion, we also believe that such a liaison can present a critical learning space that may not be possible in any other context or contrived in any other way. To imagine that learning only takes place in a place of “calm” is to miss the ways in which contradictions, ambiguities, anger, pain, and struggles can be sources of energy to facilitate critical consciousness necessary for individual and social change. The need for critical consciousness and social change form the bedrock of feminist scholarship, teaching, and activism. Therefore, teaching as a mode of activism must lead us to this change.

Reflecting on the process and reasoning for our self-disclosure allowed for an opportunity to connect with our students at a much more personal level. Vulnerability became a way of linking our students with us and our world, thus creating a learning environment that connected us with our students at a deeper level than any other method/approach to teaching. In discussing the importance of connecting with our students, feminist theorists have theorized the process and the goal of learning in various ways. Weiler, for

example, argues that teaching should not be done for the sake of teaching but for transformation. Transformation speaks not only to the way we think but also to how we help our students to become critical thinkers. Transformation, therefore, speaks to us beyond our intellect and into our consciousness about who we are and what our experiences are in a learning environment. In the same vein, Behar articulates the concept of vulnerability through self-disclosure in a very insightful way. Though she argues that ethnography that does not break your heart is not worth doing, she also lets us know that we must not allow ourselves to be vulnerable for the sake of vulnerability. Rather the sense of vulnerability must take us and our students somewhere in our learning/teaching endeavors.

We believe that self-disclosure and vulnerability that we experience as women faculty of color help us to not only connect with our students at a deeper level but also provide innovative avenues for other feminist teachers and theorists to envision teaching and engaging their students. In addition, they offer new ways of theorizing and imagining a classroom environment that reflects the challenges and realities of our everyday lives. While the conventional methods of teaching prescribe a mess-free mechanical classroom environment, we theorize self-disclosure and vulnerability as a way of imagining a *transformative classroom* that disrupts and blurs neat boundaries and opens up the classroom to become an extension of the world in which we live. This kind of classroom environment allows our students and ourselves to explore and navigate together our learning/teaching experiences as we interact with the reading materials and with each

other in a trusting environment that we create together. Such a *transformative classroom*, we have come to realize, is not created by merely including a statement about “safe” space in the course outline or through a declaration at the beginning of the course. Rather, this transformative but challenging and conducive classroom is created as our students and ourselves confront and navigate our fears, joys, frustrations, and discoveries. A *transformative classroom* is really in turmoil, because by putting women of color in the center, our identities, assumptions, our normalcy of comfort zones for both faculty and students are constantly being challenged and disrupted. Specifically, we believe that through our own vulnerability, we are able to invite our students, particularly the white students, to confront their fears and anxieties of learning about women of color, to deal with the aspects of seeing themselves as representing the dominant culture, and to address their fears of seeming to perpetuate oppression against women of color and other marginalized groups. Ultimately, therefore, vulnerability that moves us to action and transformation aligns very well with the feminist goal of teaching/learning articulated by Behar, Weiler, and hooks and is authenticated by sharing our own experiences.

Implications of Women of Color Perspectives for Feminist Pedagogy

In conclusion, we have argued that as women of color we teach vulnerably based on our subjective identities, which play a major role in how we navigate through the pedagogical practices in the classroom. We have also argued that conventional feminist pedagogical practices such as

“safe” classrooms do not reflect the realities of women professors of color teaching in predominantly white institutions. As a result, the experiences of women faculty of color have been marginalized and rendered invisible. We have demonstrated through our own experiences, however, that the lived realities of women of color in academia, which include self-disclosure and vulnerability, are essential to how we teach as women of color and how we can make invaluable contributions to conventional and feminist pedagogical discourses.

We contend that such contributions would also enrich and make inclusive not only the pedagogical discourses in higher education but also inform the educational policies in institutions of higher learning with regards to faculty of color and particularly women of color. Issues such as low retention of faculty of color, the political nature of hiring and evaluating faculty of color in the tenure and promotion processes, and the disapproving student evaluations that faculty of color who teach racial and gender classes often receive because of the political nature of the class, will be understood as institutional problems rather than personal struggles. This realization is an important step to the university making structural changes such as creating orientation and mentoring programs for faculty of color as well as students.

We have also argued that although self-disclosure and vulnerability are crucial aspects in the lives of women faculty of color in academia, self-disclosure and vulnerability can also raise new questions and offer new ways of thinking about and “doing” teaching.

In challenging the claim about creating a “safe” classroom, we suggest that feminists begin to look at self-disclosure

and vulnerability as important teaching practices that should be built into feminist as well as conventional methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical discourses. We truly believe that feminists have a moral, ethical, social, and political responsibility not only to acknowledge these issues in order to expand feminist pedagogy, but also to change the status quo in universities and society. As long as feminist pedagogy does not acknowledge the contributions and experiences of women of color, as long as the problems of women of color are seen as personal rather than institutional or societal issues, and as long as teaching and education are seen as objective rather than subjective endeavors, the problems women of color face will continue to be marginalized and silenced, and teaching and education will continue to perpetuate the unequal power relations. In that context, education will never be the practice of freedom.

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

—Lorde 99

NOTES

1. For more discussions on race, gender, nationality, accents, etc. in the classroom, see Berry and Mizelle; Li and Beckett; Jacobs, Cintrón, and Canton; Mabokela and Green; Stanley; and TuSmith and Reddy.
2. Kyoko Kishimoto is an Asian American professor; she is U.S. born but was educated in the U.S. and Asia. Mumbi Mwangi is an African professor; she was born, raised, and educated in Africa but did graduate studies in the U.S.
3. We use U.S. American to refer to somebody specifically from the United States of America. The common usage of “American” as referring to only people of the U.S. is inaccurate and problematic because America includes the entire Western Hemisphere.

4. Panopticism is a concept of prison design where surveillance of the prisoners is constant, invisible, and hidden. Foucault uses this prison surveillance analogy to discuss how the power structure normalizes the pervasive control over its people.

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